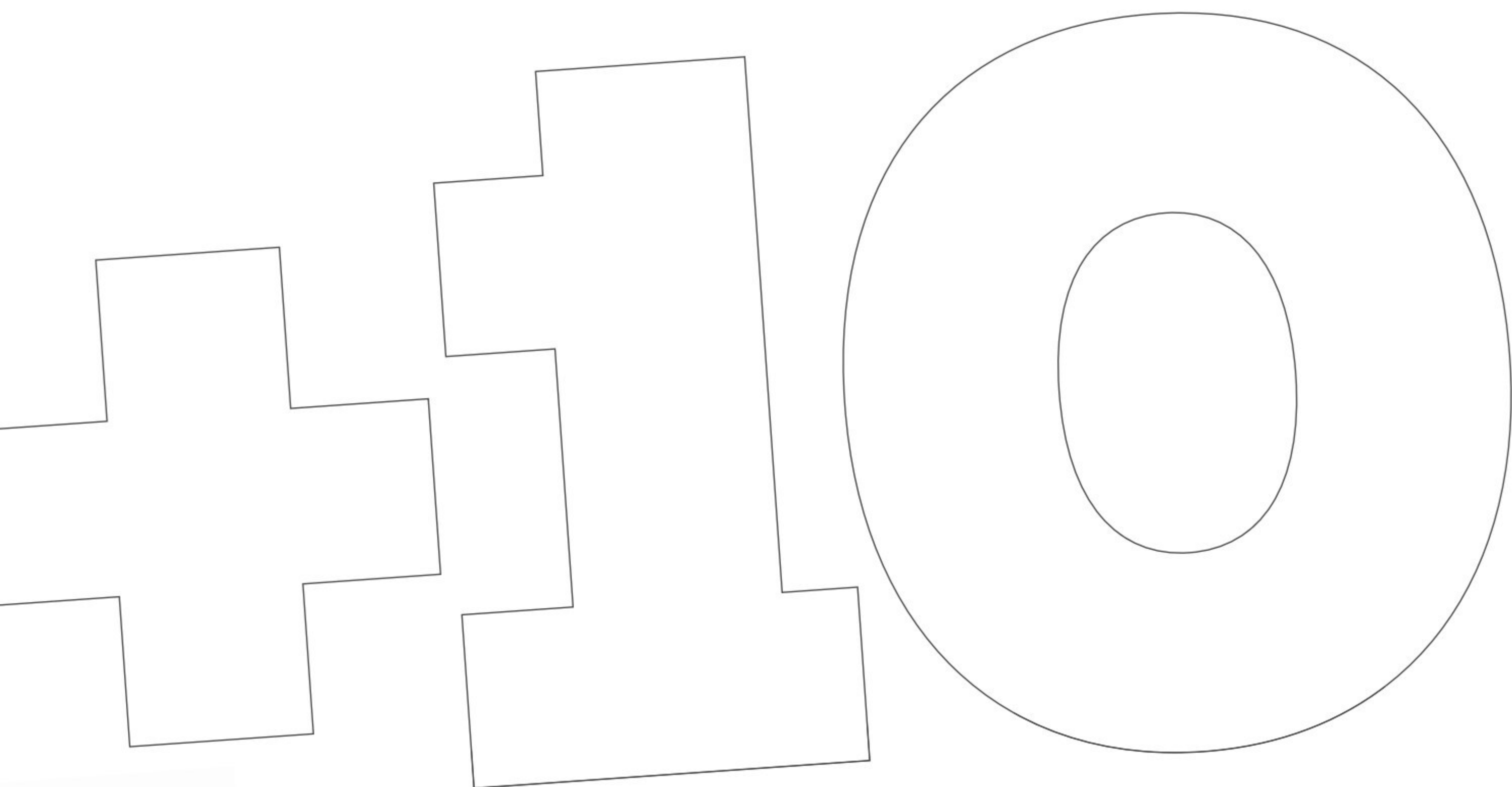


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MIRAGE
ASSASSIN'S CREED
MIRAGE



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EDITOR'S NOTE

CHANGING IT UP



MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

EVERYBODY HAS FAVORITE GENRES. As a kid, I adored JRPGs. I'd play titles like Final Fantasy and Dragon Warrior to fill my days on the NES. It was an enthusiasm that persisted for years, often to the exclusion of other games. Only later did I realize what I'd been missing and expanded my arenas of play. I think that's when I really fell in love with gaming.

The breadth of experiences today is far wider than what I had as a kid, but it's all too tempting to get wrapped up in the familiar. Today's MMOs, online shooters, and annualized sports releases are meticulously crafted to keep your attention

and bring you back for more. If you're playing Madden, Destiny, or League of Legends, it's almost difficult not to fall down the rabbit hole and make it the centerpiece of your leisure time.

And that can be awesome. Throwing yourself headfirst into a great game and mastering what it throws at you is a ton of fun. That fun is only accentuated by the in-game communities surrounding big releases, providing a community of individuals who share your excitement. It's not just about the game itself but the relationships and connections you find there.

Even so, I'd argue the gaming landscape is too fascinating right now to keep your head in the sand of just a single game all the time. You don't have to abandon a favorite to step away for a few days or weeks. Often, that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and you can return to your nightly rituals with a renewed sense of engagement.

In the meantime, I recommend looking around and trying some genres you've never considered. It's an ideal time to do so.

Indie studios are rolling out creative projects at a pace hard to track. Recent releases like Viewfinder, Dave the Diver, and Stray Gods (p. 75) are expanding the way we think about gameplay, while other indie devs are bringing new life to old formulas, like Sabotage's Sea of Stars (p. 66). Do you love storytelling in your MMOs and action games? It would be a shame to miss out on Baldur's Gate 3 (p. 70) and the sprawling scope of its worldbuilding. Big development houses like CD Projekt Red are spending countless hours revising and improving on existing releases; if you haven't yet played Cyberpunk 2077, our look into the new expansion and the changes to the core game since its contentious launch suggests it's an opportune moment to check it out (see p. 38).

That's just a smattering of titles, but I'm sure you take my point. Games have crossed a threshold akin to literature and film, with more out there than anyone can hope to experience. But it's worth experimenting and trying the unexpected. The discovery of something novel is central to what most gamers enjoy about playing a good game. Do yourself the favor of embracing that opportunity and trying something new in the game you choose to play tonight.

Play well. Be well.



ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

The Assassin's Creed series has transformed in recent years into something closer to an open-world RPG. Mirage takes the series back to its roots and puts players in control of an expert assassin who relies on his tools and expertise more than accumulated experience points. The cover image showcases protagonist Basim Ibn Is'haq in front of ninth-century Baghdad – the primary location of this throwback Assassin's Creed. You can read the full cover story on p. 22.

GAMEINFORMER

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*Won a battle
of the bands in
high school*

*Lost the company talent
show. Destined to win
next year*

*Sadly missed out on
Noah Kahan tickets*

*Needs more corn dog
nuggets in the fast
food world*

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Jon Woodey

Web Designer & Programmer

It almost feels like a personal attack on my time with how many games have come out recently or will come out soon that can draw me away from Final Fantasy XIV. Palia, Baldur's Gate 3, Sea of Stars, and Starfield look to eat up all my leisure time, and as overwhelming as that is, I'm embracing it. There are long periods where new games don't speak to me, so when a bunch decide to crop up all at once, it's nice to know that studios are still creating games I find enjoyable.



Blake Hester

Senior Associate Editor

I recently played Killer7, and it's now one of my favorite games. But it had the unfortunate side effect of making me realize how much capital-S Style is missing from triple-A games these days. Everything in Killer7 – from the menus to the camera angles, from the music to the bizarre controls – is in service of fitting the game's unique presentation. Now, it feels like most big-budget games want to look and feel like some other game – usually Destiny or The Last of Us. Killer7 is still in a league of its own. You have to play it.

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After its latest round of franchise fatigue, the Assassin's Creed series is returning to its roots. We traveled to France to play the game, talk to the team, and we're ready to tell you everything we know.

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Behind the scenes of all your favorite multiplayer games is a delicate tightrope act. We interviewed the people responsible for balancing Valorant and League of Legends about the trials of the job.

38 **LESSONS LEARNED**

Cyberpunk 2077's curse is being forever marked by its disastrous release. But the game's immense success also means the developers get to try and turn this into a redemption arc. Read about the game's new expansion, Phantom Liberty, and hear from the team behind it.

46 **A WAKING NIGHTMARE**

A few years ago, a sequel to Alan Wake II seemed impossible. Now, it's inevitable. We've seen the game in action and talked to its creative leads. Here's what to expect.

76 **THE HISTORY OF SPLINTER CELL**

Ubisoft's once flagship series, Splinter Cell, has been long dormant. But there is a remake of the first game on the way. What better way to celebrate than reading how that original game was made.



regulars

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CAN A SANDWICH
CRAFTED WITH
DELECTABLY ROASTED
CUTS MAKE YOUR
TASTE BUDS QUAKE
WITH YEARNING?



OH, **HILL** YEAH.™



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Replies



LIGHTNING STRIKING TWICE

I've had a soft spot for the Final Fantasy series ever since it first appeared on the NES. These days, lucky PS5 owners like me have access to a huge selection! The recently released Final Fantasy Pixel Remaster includes I through VI. There are remasters (and remakes!) of VII through X, as well as XII. Final Fantasy XIV and XV are on the latest systems, as is the newest entry, Final Fantasy XVI. We can even play spin-offs like Crisis Core and Stranger of Paradise.

The only main/numbered entries that you can't find are Final Fantasy XI (the MMO) and the Final Fantasy XIII trilogy. I know XIII is a bit of a controversial entry, but I'd still love a chance to experience Lightning's story. It's a blind spot in my FF saga and one I'd love to correct. Any idea why FFXIII is the sole main entry to be shunned from modern consoles? Is there any hope we'll be able to play it on the latest consoles or is hunting for a PS3 on eBay my only option? – **Mike S. via email**

↳ Gamers who grew up in the '80s and '90s were trained that when a new console came out, they either put away their old system and lost access to that library or simply have multiple generations of consoles plugged into the same TV. Today, we're conditioned to expect not only multiple generations of games to be playable through backward compatibility but also through digital re-releases. As you aptly pointed out, Final Fantasy fans have been among the largest beneficiaries of this trend, as nearly every mainline entry is playable on most modern consoles.

The exclusion of the Final Fantasy XIII trilogy has long been a headscratcher. While it is available on modern systems like Xbox Series X/S through its backward compatibility with the Xbox 360 versions and on PC via Steam, it's completely absent from modern PlayStation consoles. You're correct that it was polarizing, but it feels like modern sentiment toward the Final Fantasy XIII trilogy has swung in a more positive direction. With so much of the franchise easily accessible, it's a shame that XIII isn't playable on modern PlayStation consoles. But hey, it could be worse; Switch users can only play up to Final Fantasy XII (unless you count the mobile port of Final Fantasy XV: Pocket Edition). Hopefully both PlayStation and Switch owners can enjoy a Final Fantasy XIII collection at some point soon.



Reader art submission: Declan, age 11

PRIMED FOR MORE

I recently watched a video discussing all the games announced near the start of the current generation that still have not come out, but they aren't officially canceled either. What game in this category, if any, are you still looking forward to? For me, I am still very excited to see Metroid Prime 4. – **GhstofMthHdbrg via Discord**

↳ Metroid Prime 4 is a fantastic example. It was one of the most exciting announcements during the Switch's first year in 2017. But after a failed first attempt by Bandai Namco, and development restarting in 2019 under Retro Studios, we know this might be a bumpy ride. While Nintendo has remained largely silent on the Metroid Prime 4 front, we thankfully received some signs of life with the excellent Metroid Prime Remastered. With rumors of a Metroid Prime 2 remaster swirling, it certainly seems like Nintendo might be building up to something. For the longest time, our answer to this question might have been Bayonetta 3, but that finally arrived last year. Now, Metroid Prime 4 is probably the most obvious answer, but we're also trying to remain patient for Hollow Knight: Silksong, Little Devil Inside, and Beyond Good and Evil 2.





Reader art submission:
Aria R., age 11



Reader art submission:
Matt Drudge



We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Final Fantasy XVI
2. Baldur's Gate 3 **NEW RELEASE**
3. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom ▼
4. Diablo IV ▼
5. Remnant 2 **NEW RELEASE**
6. Street Fighter 6 ▼
7. The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt ▲
8. Pikmin 4 **NEW RELEASE**
9. Resident Evil 4 ▲
10. Atlas Fallen **NEW RELEASE**

Soundoff:

What Readers Want From The Next Nintendo Console

We asked our readers and community what they most want from the next Nintendo console. Here are some of their responses!

Backward compatibility, of course, but can we please have better hardware? I don't need 4K, but I'd love for 60 FPS or even a solid 30 FPS and not have to rely on dynamic resolution for games. Make it a lot more powerful. I wish they'd keep the OLED screen, but I understand costs would be an issue. – **via Facebook**

Comparable graphics to PS4 Pro or Xbox Series S at least (with modern chipsets to take advantage of potential features like raytracing and A.I. upscaling), fast SSD storage, OLED screen, and better Joy Cons. I love my Switch, and for a portable, it is insanely competent and was super impressive and innovative when it was released, but I don't want the new console to feel like a relic a year after it's out and once again be wishing I knew what it would be like to play Zelda on something that looked up to date. – **via Instagram**

4K and 60 FPS. I think Tears of the Kingdom really showed the limits of the Switch's hardware. An affordable handheld with that capability would be very impressive. – **via Twitter**

Home menu customization. How did we go the entire Switch lifecycle and only still have black-and-white themes? The 3DS had it nailed! – **via Instagram**

While I'm excited for so many games coming out, I'm more excited to play the game, "How the heck am I going to find the time to play all of these games?" – **LegendofGamer102 via Discord**

SUBSCRIBING TO THAT NOTION

It feels like subscription-based media is at a growth crossroads. Many are cutting content and increasing prices to increase profits and reduce costs. Now that we have had various subscriptions in gaming, how do you think the next few years will take shape, and how will it compare to the landscape of other media subscription types? – **Joodonkadonk via Discord**

↳ Netflix changed the game when it demonstrated people would pay a monthly fee to stream their content instead of owning it. The video streaming concept was originally positioned to cut costs from pricey cable bills, but once Netflix gave major corporations its proof of concept, every other company jumped into the pool. Now, if you want to keep up with the hottest shows across platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Disney Plus, Apple TV Plus, Max, Paramount Plus, Peacock, and others, you're likely paying more than \$100 a month, which might be more than you were paying when you last had your cable subscription. Add to

that the current trend of increasing prices and cracking down on password sharing, all while removing content to cut costs, and the glory days of streaming platforms might well be behind us.

In the early days of gaming subscription services, platform holders merely dipped their toes in the water with initiatives like Xbox's Games with Gold and PlayStation Plus Instant Game Collection. Xbox Game Pass showed the other platform holders how it's done and remains one of the best values in gaming today. PlayStation Plus has followed suit, offering various tiers full of classic and modern games, while Nintendo offers classic game catalogs through its Nintendo Switch Online subscriptions. Subscription services may work better overall in the gaming space since gaming is intrinsically a more expensive hobby than most other entertainment media, but once the exponential subscriber growth stops – as it has in the video-streaming space – we'll have to see how these companies begin trying to recoup the lost profits to appease shareholders. We suspect the answer won't be "The CEO takes a pay cut."

Join the conversation

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Reader art submission: Charlotte Peterson, age 13



Reader art submission:
Mina Bowman, age 16



Reader art submission:
Isabella Roberts, age 13

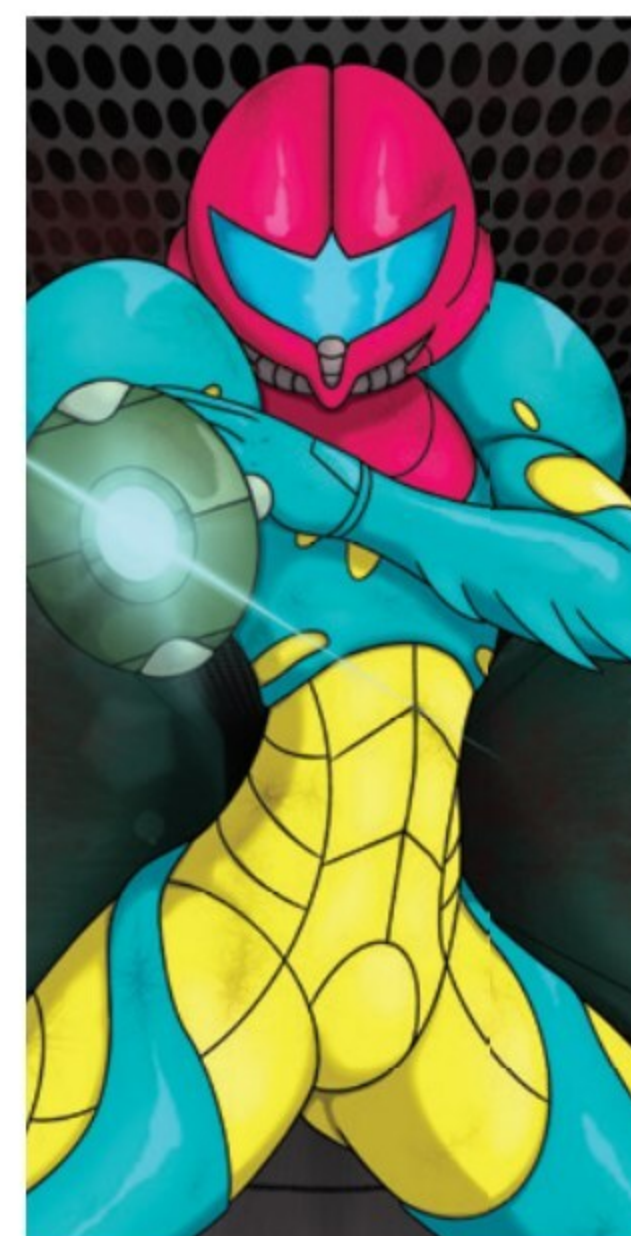


Reader art winner:
Cheyennes, age 14

NEW ADDITIONS TO THE PARTY

I feel like a sizable group of excellent JRPGs have come out in the last 10 to 15 years. Do you think there are any major shake-ups in rankings for the best JRPGs of all time? Live A Live, Octopath Traveler 2, Xenoblade Chronicles 3, and others come to mind. – Jherb24 via Discord

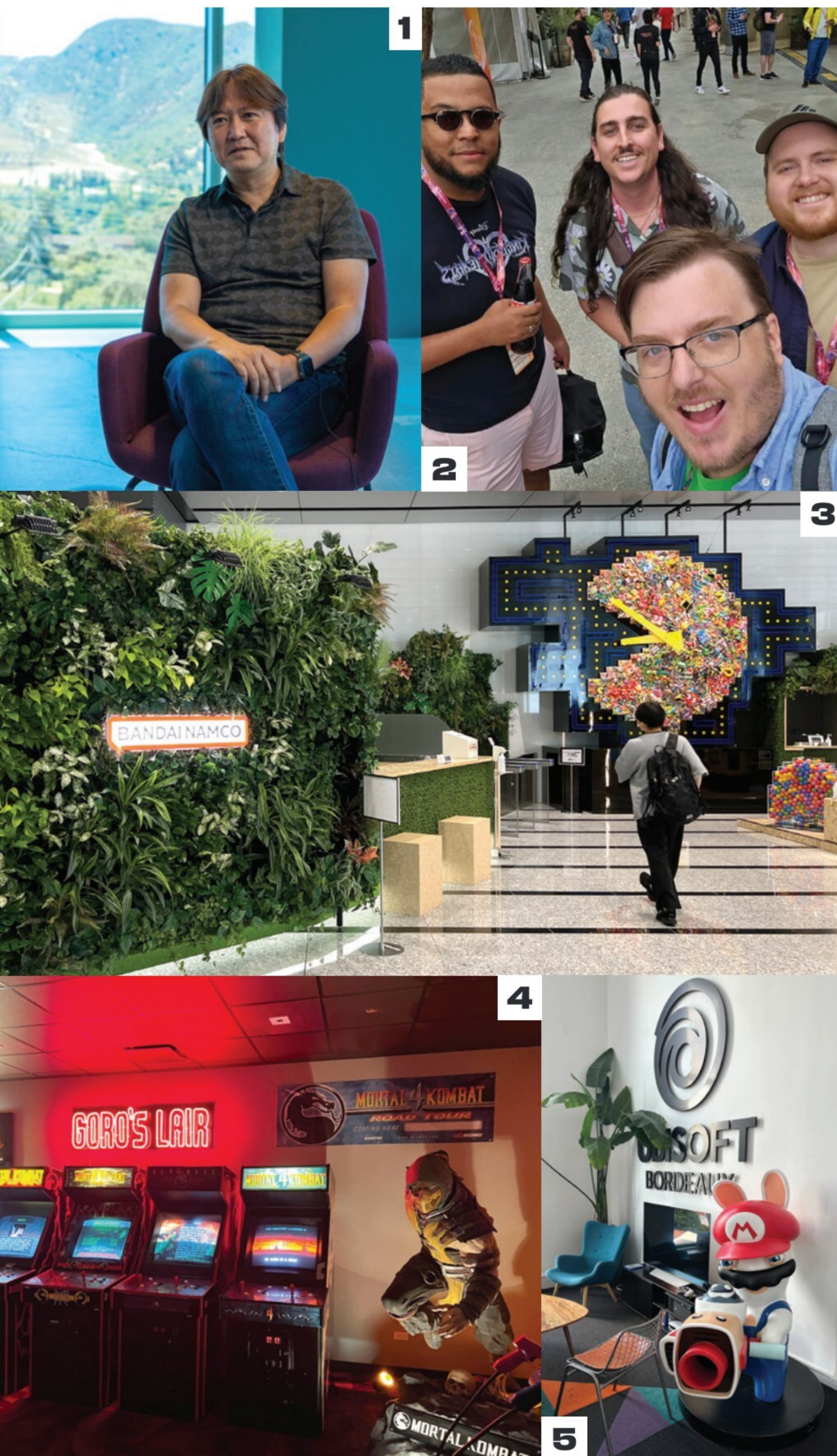
➡ All of those you mentioned are fantastic. *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* is probably the frontrunner to be included as “one of the greats.” And while other all-time great RPGs have come out in the last 15 years – *The Witcher 3*, *Skyrim*, and *Baldur’s Gate 3*, to name a few – if we’re talking solely about recent JRPGs, the one that sticks out to us is *Persona 5*. However, games like *Dragon Quest XI*, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, and *Shin Megami Tensei V* all deserve consideration. But just as many modern platformers and fighting games have a difficult time dethroning foundational entries like *Super Mario Bros. 3* and *Street Fighter II* on “greatest games of all time” lists, we suspect that as amazing as the advancements of modern JRPGs are, it’ll always be difficult to rank modern titles above classics like *Final Fantasy VI* and *Chrono Trigger*.



Reader art submission:
Parker Tano

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers getting information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the industry.



1.

We spent hours with Sonic Team creative officer Takashi Iizuka for last issue's Sonic Superstars cover. Head to GameInformer.com/SonicSuperstars for our written and video interviews

2.

Wes and Alex caught up with Destructoid's Eric Van Allen and journalist Cameron Hawkins

3.

The lobby of Bandai Namco appropriately leans into one of its biggest hits

4.

We went to Chicago to visit NetherRealm Studios and get our hands on Mortal Kombat 1 before it launches. Read our full preview on p. 58

5.

We traveled to France to visit Ubisoft Bordeaux and get our hands on Assassin's Creed Mirage, which you can read about on p. 22. We don't think Rabbid Mario is in the game ■



A VIRTUAL BALANCING ACT

Competitive
games require
numerous checks and
balances. We spoke
to the developers
responsible

BY DE'ANGELO EPPS



➤
Riot Games'
League of
Legends
champion
Ezreal

Crafting a competitive game is one of the largest balancing acts in the game industry. Whether fighting game or shooter, tons of decisions invisible to the player constantly shape the experiences. To do this, from pre- to post-release, developers must ask themselves many questions. “Is this aspect fun?” “Is this too strong?” “Is this user-friendly?” And so on.

Answering these questions is the job of a game’s balancing team. Players see things differently than them, but the relationship between experience and developer knowledge is a necessary one. To find out how some of the biggest games in the world are balanced, I talked to the teams behind Valorant and League of Legends.

The big question headlining this all is, “Why balance?” Why not release a game and support it in other ways, letting the meta grow and change independently? There are many answers, but above all, it’s done to keep the game fresh and players happy.

Glenn Jones, a game designer on Marvel Snap, shared in an update that it’s done “to constantly provide something new and exciting to look forward to for players.” Constantly changing and bringing more diversity to the metagame always presents the player base with something new to learn and have fun with.

Valorant designer Jay Watford shares this sentiment, saying developer Riot Games’ goal with balancing and issuing updates is to ensure players always have new challenges to overcome. Sometimes this is done with new agents and maps; sometimes, it’s in the way matches play out differently every session. “Balance updates play a part in keeping the game feeling fresh, but we don’t make balance changes just to shake things up,” Watford says. “Our goals instead are usually around making lesser-picked options more viable or reducing the power of choices that have become overly dominant in the meta to increase the overall depth of compelling decisions made in the game.”



➤
Riot Games'
Valorant
gameplay

But how do developers monitor what needs to be balanced? There is a common variable: Information is split into different player skill brackets. Deck builds, team builds, and character and weapon usage are all vital parts of that information. That info is then stacked on top of details from player feedback. In Valorant's case, that comes from player surveys and other analyzed parts of the game such as "winrates, pickrates, usage," and other factors, Cole Schwab and Tiffany Tsay, Valorant gameplay researcher and gameplay analyst, respectively, say. Altogether, these show what may need patching in many competitive titles. This is why those player feedback surveys you find in your email are so important.

However, this information overload is also one of the biggest issues facing designers. "Sage, who despite having one of the highest winrates in the game, is often seen by players as being one of the weaker agents," Schwab says when speaking on the disparities between information sources. "These conflicts also exist across skill bands, where agents can be strong in pro play, for example, but weak in non-coordinated settings. This adds a level of difficulty to our balance decisions, where we have to figure out how to change an Agent's power in one player group or setting without influencing others."

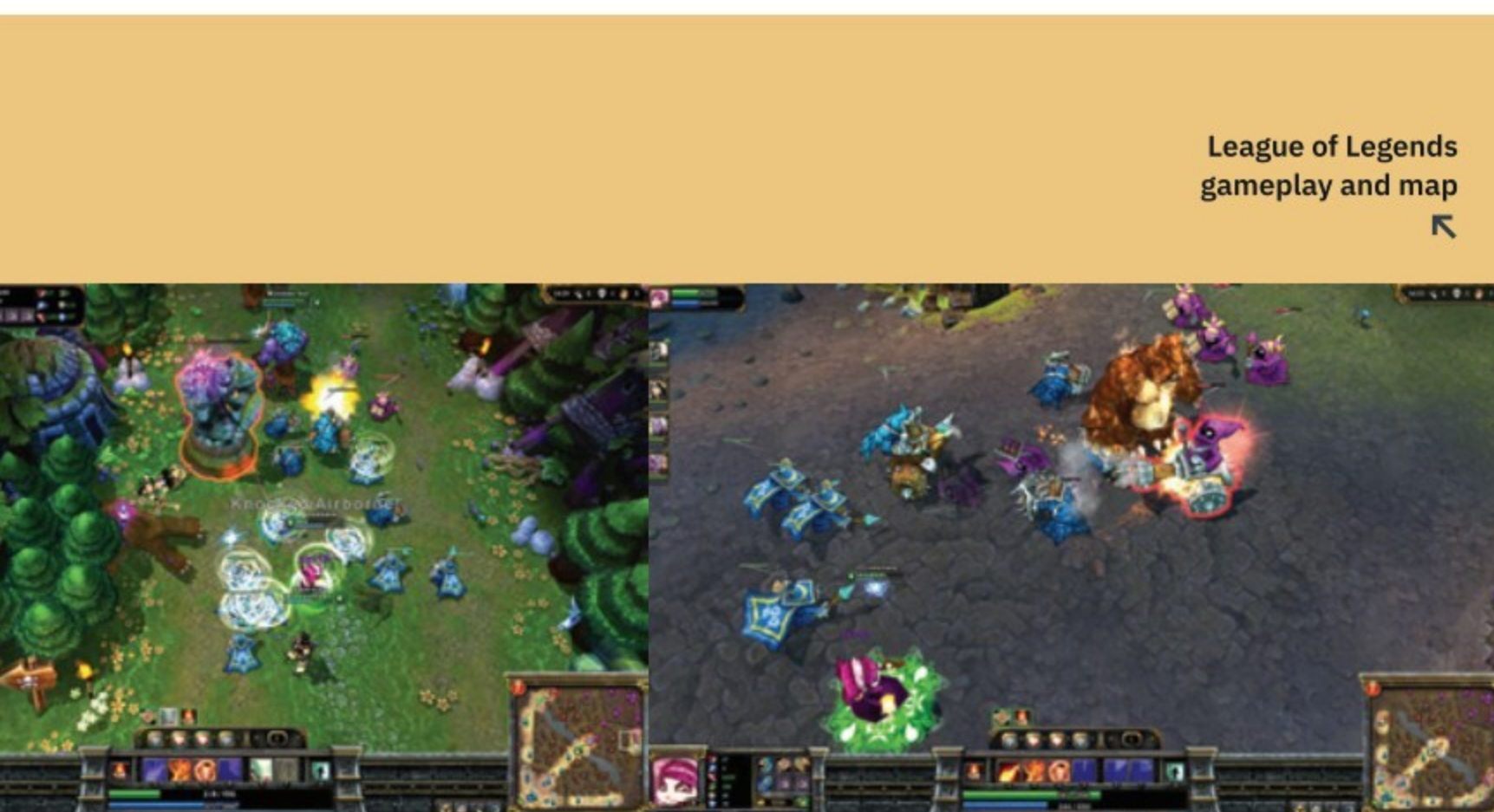


Of course, in the world of competitive games, there will always be tiers; some characters are stronger than others, such as in the case of Sage and the rest of the Agents. Game designers analyze this in two ways: Looking at what something strong entails emotionally for players and looking at two sides of the character itself.

"There's a difference between being objectively strong and being frustrating or feeling too strong. Something can feel too strong to players while being factually weak," Leung-Harrison, lead game designer on the League of Legends Summoner's Rift team, says. "We try to update our understanding of what players find unfair or frustrating (especially if they are subjective) and tend to make changes when exceeding a certain level."

"When working on our Agent and weapon ecosystems, our goal is to offer players different strategic and tactical choices as opposed to outright more powerful options," Watford says. "For example, an Agent should offer players unique strengths and strategic options while also having clear downsides compared to their peers on the roster. This design principle helps ensure that we're designing content that has a unique and powerful spot within the game but also leaves space for other viable approaches and interesting choices."

"That said, there are definitely times when certain Agents or weapons prove more powerful than their counterparts and become dominant in the game meta. When designing content, we always try to ensure that we include levers that are easy to change but are impactful on balance, often in the form of numbers that we can shift up or down as needed."



League of Legends
gameplay and map





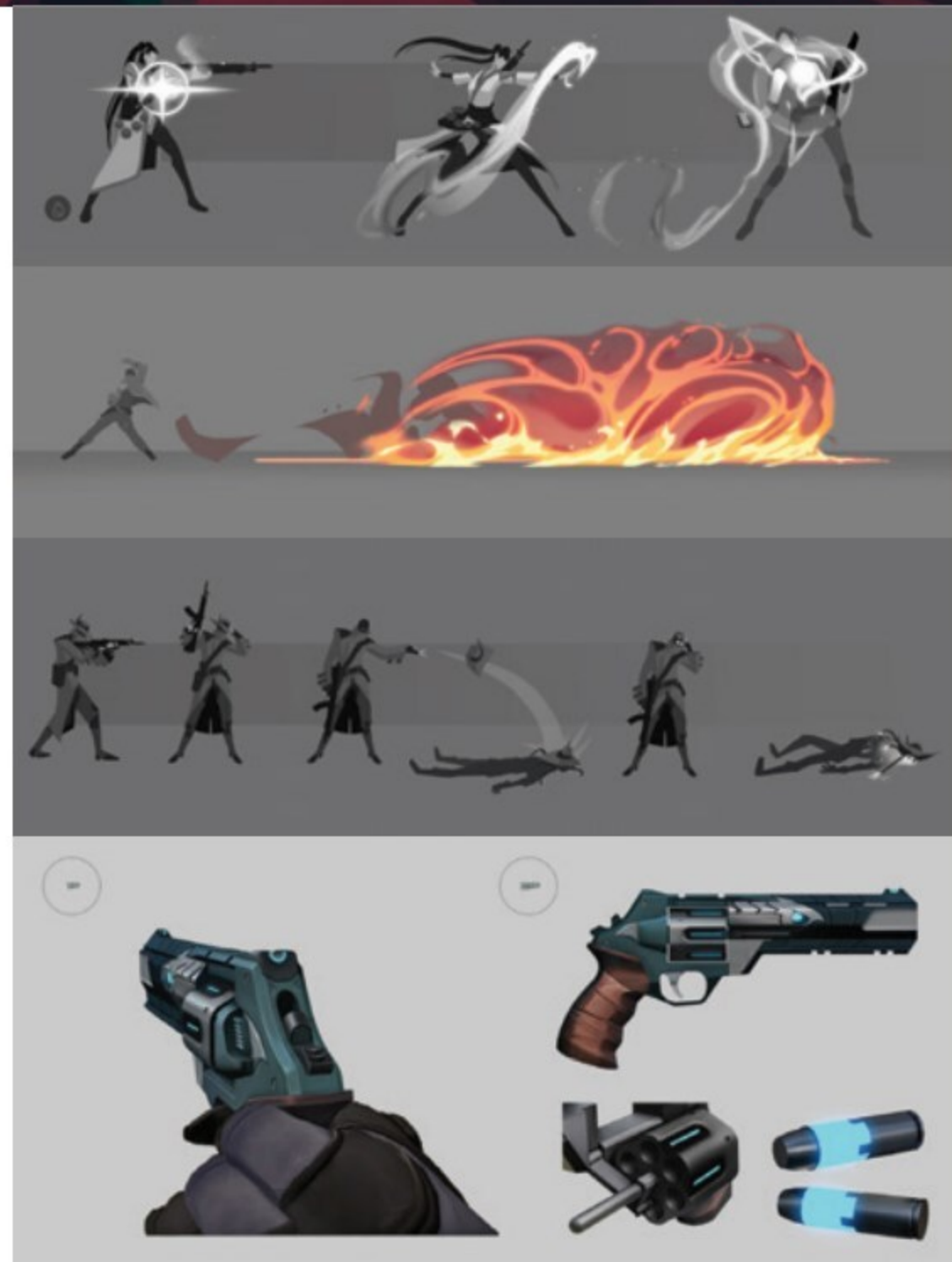
Other times, if a problem warrants a big change and we can't achieve it through numbers, we'll make bigger changes to how a piece of content works."

This is also the case with content players may find "unbalanced." However, viewed through game designers' eyes, something a player finds unbalanced may actually be a healthy piece of a competitive game. "We think some amount of frustrating champions leads to a better experience in the long run," Leung-Harrison says. "This is because it creates more high and low moments, and low moments are required from someone to create high moments for someone else."

Today, making these changes is easier than ever, thanks to the advent of hotfixes and roll-back changes. Christina Pollock, a designer who's worked on the Call of Duty series, says changes like hotfixes were rare once upon a time because they required a lot of manual work.

"But then they invested in the hotfix process, and bam! All of a sudden, hotfixes were easy, and that let designers ship riskier changes," Pollock says. "Before, if you shipped something that was way too strong, too weak, or just didn't work as well with real players, they were stuck with it for two weeks. These days it's much more acceptable to try new things because you can roll them back in a day."

This detail is more than evident in an age where games rely on constant fixes and changes to stay alive for ever-changing player bases. With the growth of live-service games and their communities comes more of a need to keep them both balanced and updated. Now next time you open those patch notes for your favorite competitive game,



Valorant concept artwork

remember how much work went into dropping that rate of fire by one millisecond, and think to yourself, "Why?"

"These changes can cause player pain, and we don't take them lightly," Watford says, "but we've found that if we communicate with players about our philosophies and intentions we can work through them and build a stronger shared understanding of what we think is unique, exciting, and worth working towards." ■

GEAR

THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL BUYING GUIDE

As the new school year gets underway, there's plenty of fun stuff to discover, from tech and threads to bring to class to games and toys to fill downtime to décor for your new dorm room or gaming setup. Check out our curated selections of new gear to ease your transition back into learning. BY KYLE HILLIARD & MATT MILLER

1 THE LIGHT PHONE

Contemporary popular phones boast hundreds of features and immediate access to the internet from anywhere, but The Light Phone is taking a different approach. It strips down its features significantly to help you look at a screen as little as possible. You can make calls, send and receive texts, listen to podcasts and music, and get simple driving directions on its electronic paper screen (which will be familiar to e-reader users), but it purposefully does not have internet or social media access. If you want to lower your screen, internet, and social media time (and potentially focus more on school), The Light Phone is a great avenue to do just that.

\$299 | lightphone.com

1

2

2 STAR TREK USS ENTERPRISE HOODIE

Everybody needs some cozy study gear to help them survive those long nights looking at books. Whether you've come to the franchise through the excellent recent *Strange New Worlds* or are an original series fan, this comfortable Star Trek zip-up should please you. Sturdy embroidered patches and emblems and the NCC-1701 registry printed along the sleeve all look good without being garish. Here's hoping your coursework isn't a five-year mission, but even if it is, you can stay warm as you explore.

\$90 | heroesvillains.com

3 DRAGONBANE CORE SET

While North American fans explored the early editions of D&D, Scandinavians had their own sprawling tabletop RPG renaissance in 1982 with the widely loved *Drakar och Demoner*. Over 40 years later, this new and retitled English edition offers classic fantasy adventures that are fun, funny, and incredibly harrowing. Breathtaking art by Johan Egerkrans is almost worth the price of admission, but it's the simple-to-learn rules and brisk structure of play that will keep you and your evening gaming group hooked. The boxed set is a first-rate introduction to an awesome game, with plenty to offer both veteran and beginner role-players.

\$46 | freeleaguepublishing.com

4 STAR WARS YODA MILESTONES STATUE

We hope you have some great teachers this semester, but they'd be hard-pressed to compete with the 900-year-old Jedi master's years of tutelage. This 1/6th scale statue meticulously captures the foundational character as he appeared in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when Luke Skywalker finds him by a rotted tree on the benighted world of Dagobah. Yoda may be more diminutive at just over 5 inches in height than many other scaled replicas, but the detailing is spot-on. Plus, judge him by his size, do you? And well, you should not.

\$200 | gentlegiantltd.com

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

4



1 ROG ALLY

For many, the Steam Deck opened a new avenue, capably bringing the PC gaming experience into a user-friendly handheld experience. Since its launch, many competitors have joined the fray; ASUS makes a strong case for the next step forward. Running on Windows 11 makes it more familiar for many, and the included tech, from the 16 GB RAM to the slick graphics provided by an AMD Ryzen Z1 Series processor, leads to a smooth and enjoyable play experience. The Ally runs quietly and coolly and feels great in hand. The Full HD 120 Hz display looks beautiful, whether you're loading up Steam games or tapping into your Xbox Game Pass titles. If you're considering a jump into handheld PC play to bring along to school this year, it's well worth a deeper look.

\$700 | shop.asus.com



2 OPTIMUS PRIME RISE OF THE BEASTS SIGNATURE ROBOT

Squarely targeted at the most dedicated collectors, Robosen's pricey robotic Transformers figures have set a new bar for authenticity. Far more than a toy or statue, this representation of the Autobot leader is an actual moving and speaking (but not transforming) robot, capable of swinging weapons, shifting into new poses, and responding to your voice. New dialogue recorded by Peter Cullen (the character's original voice actor) helps the figure take on a life-like cinematic presence, and you can control his actions through 16 distinct commands or via a connected app. Standing at 16 inches in height, Prime towers even higher when mounted on his stand as he shifts between different postures and scenes. If the live-action movie characters aren't your thing, check out Robosen's takes on the original G1 characters, including Grimlock, Bumblebee, and a more classic take on Optimus Prime.

\$900 | us.robosen.com



3



3 FOLDABLE GAMING CHAIR

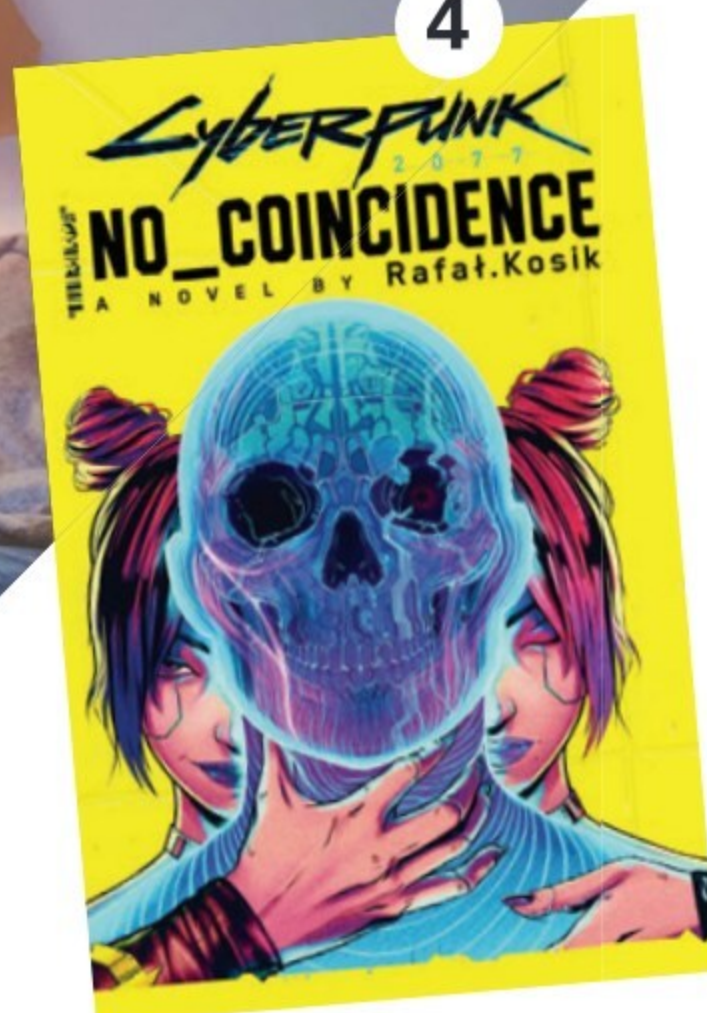
Whether you're dealing with a tight dorm room, or a living room sofa that's too far from the TV, it's not always easy to set up a permanent comfortable seat close to your gaming screen. The foldable gaming chair aims to solve those unique cases, with a design built around comfort and easy stowaway between play periods. In practice, the chair feels like an exceptionally cushy outdoor chair, but one that includes a bevy of options, including a headphone hangar, a recessed controller space, a cupholder, and even a wine glass slot for the more discerning adult player.

\$149 | foldablegamingchair.com

4 CYBERPUNK 2077: NO COINCIDENCE

Even as the long-awaited game expansion prepares to roll out, CD Projekt Red is expanding the Cyberpunk fiction in new directions. This new novel, by celebrated sci-fi author Rafat Kosik, pulls together a tense and intricate heist plot that feels grounded in the neon-soaked trappings of Night City. While largely standalone, the storytelling also sheds some added light on threads left behind from the game. If you're considering a return to the bleak future of 2077 on your gaming screen, this additional yarn is a perfect accompaniment.

\$19 (paperback) | hachettebookgroup.com



4

5 MARVEL LEGENDS MAGNETO HELMET

The master of magnetism boasts one of the most iconic pieces of headgear in the comic book canon. The version here aims to emulate the outfit seen in the upcoming *X-Men '97* animated series. The 1:1 recreation of the iconic X-Men villain's telepathy-blocking helmet is striking, almost reflective, and well-suited to some smart lighting choices wherever you decide to display. Alternatively, the piece includes soft interior padding and an adjustable fit if you prefer to play pretend. We don't recommend wearing it as you stride through the halls of your school or office, loudly pronouncing calls for mutant freedom, but you do you.

\$99 | gamestop.com | hasbropulse.com

6 D&D: THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT TABLETOP COMPANIONS BOXED SET

Back before D&D had the huge following it does today, early heroes from the connected novels helped inspire countless tabletop adventures. On the 35th anniversary of the character's first appearance, Drizzt Do'Urden and his most loyal friends are getting a boxed set of minis to celebrate. The venerable companions are looking great despite their age (drow are especially long-lived after all), arriving pre-painted and with a ton of tiny details. Drizzt and his loyal panther Guenhwyvar are present, alongside Wulfgar, Bruenor, Cattie-brie, and Regis. The elven ranger's nemesis has also snuck into the box, so you can enact duels against the treacherous Artemis Entreri.

\$50 | shop.wizkids.com



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1 EVERDELL FARSHORE

The original Everdell is one of the most successful and celebrated board games in recent years, so it's no surprise that a new standalone game in the same universe has arrived with high praise. Like its predecessor, the game leverages classic worker placement mechanics with tableau-building. Adorably beautiful anthropomorphic animal art acts as the glue to the experience. If Farshore doesn't reach that far from its source material, it's hard to complain too much, as the result is so much fun.

\$75 | tabletoptycoon.com

2 STORMBREAKER GAMING MOUSE

Wherever you're hoping to compete, the new Stormbreaker offers stellar performance and an eye-catching design that won't disappoint. While any PC player should appreciate its lightweight and lightning-quick click latency, this high-end mouse is especially well-suited to FPS players looking for an added edge. Top-tier sensor response makes for a tight and responsive play experience. And while the cut-outs look cool, they have the added benefit of dramatic weight reduction; the device feels remarkably light beneath your fingers. Despite the seeming fragility, the magnesium build is stronger than most plastics and easily holds up to long play sessions.

\$179 | pwnage.com

3 TMNT THE LAST RONIN GALLERY DIORAMA

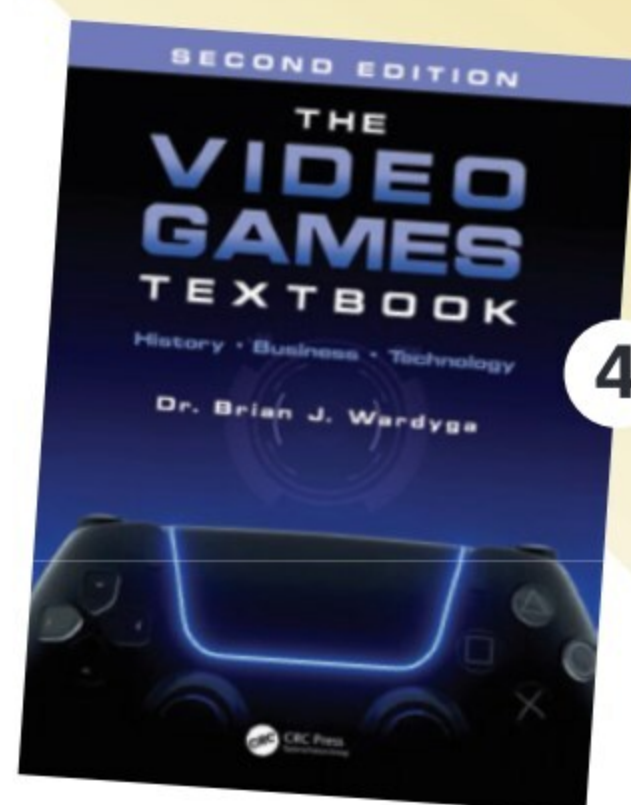
While the Ninja Turtles have remained in pop culture consciousness since their inception, the arrival of *The Last Ronin* storyline in recent years helped to recapture the imagination of longtime fans through a dark new take. After years of struggle against Shredder and his progeny, the storyline tells the tale of a final surviving member of the original foursome, intent on revenge for his murdered brothers. This 10-inch statue captures the last warrior as he charges again into battle. Great detailing captures the character, while high-quality PVC helps keep the cost manageable. Which Turtle made it through to this final fight? We're not telling.

\$75 | diamondselecttoys.com

4 THE VIDEO GAMES TEXTBOOK

If your interest in gaming at school this year has elevated to academic consideration, it may be time for a more scholarly approach. We've been impressed by the new second edition of Wardyga's weighty tome, which charts the industry's history through eras of play, individual systems, and notable games over time, focusing on cultural impact and the evolution of the discipline. New sections on VR, subscription gaming, and the most recent consoles reveal a thorough and up-to-date understanding of the subject matter and an ideal way for aspiring students to prepare for a career in the field.

\$60 | [routledge.com](https://www.routledge.com)



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5 MAXWELL WIRELESS GAMING HEADSET

Some years ago, Audeze's Penrose headset earned our high marks for its stellar sound production and overall quality. The Maxwell is the successor to that set, improving the experience across the board, making this one of the single best choices for gaming audio currently on the market. The 90mm planar magnetic drivers produce a rich and nuanced soundscape with ample power in the bass. High-quality aluminum and steel components lend durability while remaining comfortable for long sessions. The mic features AI-aided noise filtration for crystal-clear communication. It's an ample investment, but it's the only gaming audio solution you need, especially if you're staring down the lens of a new roommate situation at school this year.

\$299 | [audeze.com](https://www.audeze.com)

6 CLASS OF '81 DELUXE ARCADE GAME

Arcade1Up consistently impresses with its revivals of classic arcade properties for an authentic in-home play experience. With both its external graphical treatment and the quality of the cabinet, and with the included games, the Class of '81 machine offers a lot. While the lit marquee features Ms. Pac-Man and Galaga, you also get 10 other titles, including Dig Dug, Rolling Thunder, Rally-X, and Tower of Druaga – all landmark early games. As a standalone way to lend some old-school authenticity to your game room, it's a solid bet. ■

\$500 | [arcade1up.com](https://www.arcade1up.com)



6



TOP FIVE

GOOD TIMES

Assassin's Creed's best historical backdrops

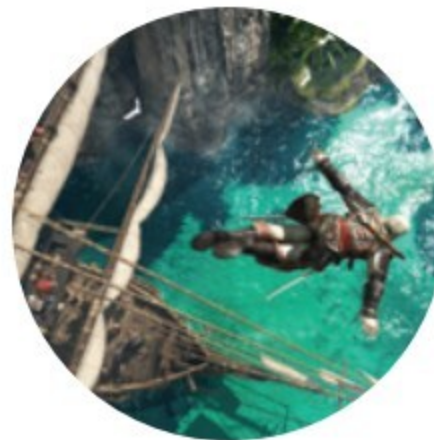
BY MARCUS STEWART



1 Renaissance Italy in AC II was the series' first truly memorable locale. Roaming Florence and Venice was awe-inspiring, and the setting's beauty and historical grandeur remain unmatched. The era was so nice they did it twice.



2 AC Origin's Ptolemaic Egypt blends ancient Egyptian and Greek culture for a two-for-one package. Exploring a faithful recreation of the Great Pyramid of Giza or spotting the long-lost Lighthouse of Alexandria from the horizon took our breaths away.



3 Few entries beat the pure fun of sailing the Caribbean during the **Golden Age of Piracy** in AC IV. Visiting tropical islands and meeting a variety of swash-buckling scoundrels convinced us the pirate life was for us.



4 French Revolution Paris was one of the most chaotic settings in history, and AC: Unity captured that perfectly. Leaping from Notre Dame Cathedral into mobs of protestors as the oppressive Bastille loomed in the distance nailed one of Europe's bloodiest periods.



5 Victorian London is the most modern setting to date, having players stab necks during the Industrial Revolution. AC: Syndicate also lets players meet a who's who of influential thinkers, from Charles Darwin to Karl Marx to Alexander Graham Bell. ■



OPINION

You've Never Played This? Good.

Why it's okay if someone hasn't played your favorite game **BY CHARLES HARTE**

Far too many video games are released in a year for anyone to reasonably play them all. But the revelation that you missed out on something popular is always met with the same incredulous statement.

"You've *never* played this?"

I understand the impulse. Some games are so fundamental to our taste or upbringing that it can be hard to process that people who did it differently exist. But there are people who have never played a Zelda game or a Halo game, and I bet if you asked a middle school crowd, plenty of them have never played Wii Sports. Personally, any shock I experience is quickly overwritten by excitement. If someone I'm close to has never played one of my favorite games, then I get to watch them experience it for the first time.

The earliest examples of this are undoubtedly tied to my relationship with my younger brother, Andre. A 6-year-old can't play games as well as an 8-year-old, so sometimes it would be a few years before he would experience a single-player game. And while

I probably initially watched him because he was playing games on the only TV we had, it eventually became a fun way to reexperience games I held near and dear to my heart.

Fast forward ten years or so. As I'm about to go to college, I buy a PlayStation 4 to have in my dorm room. Later that year Spider-Man (2018) was released, and after so many hours of playing Spider-Man: Web of Shadows with my brother, I knew he would be excited to play this far superior version. So, I took the console home on the weekends and watched as he played while essentially getting a second playthrough myself, but without the time and effort commitment. It scratches the same itch as watching a Twitch

streamer, but it's far more personal and interactive.

My gaming relationship with my partner is another great example. After we had been dating for a while, she decided to get a Switch of her own so we could play Animal Crossing together. Of course, once she had the console, she wanted to know what other games to try and wound up messing around with Breath of the Wild.

One of the most common things you hear fans of Breath of the Wild (or other huge open-world games) say is, "I wish I could play it again for the first time." I'm here to tell you – watching someone close to you try it out is the next best thing. Seeing the ways she would discover locations or enemies I was familiar with helped me to see them in a whole new light, and even though I had well over 150 hours in the game, I was shocked by how often she discovered things I missed.

I love video games, and because of that, there's no better feeling than introducing someone to a game they end up loving. I got my Minecraft-obsessed friend to try Fortnite, and now it's all he plays. In a few weeks, my partner's mom went from being confused by my Marvel Snap lingo to complaining about the latest meta decks. And it's always a joy to bust out Snipperclips at a party and watch people leave and consider getting it for themselves.

Here's my advice. It's going to sound preachy, but I mean it. Next time you hear someone say they haven't played one of your favorites (or vice versa), don't look at it as a failure in their pop culture experience. Look at it as an opportunity to connect with this person and learn or share exactly why this game is so important to warrant that reaction. Watching my friends play games has led to some of my favorite memories – maybe you can make some too. ■



Reimagining The Golden

In its first full game,
Ubisoft Bordeaux reimagines
the golden age of 9th Century
Baghdad, bringing to life an
untold story in Basim's history.
It serves as both a return to
where this series began, and a
celebration of where it's been.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action PUBLISHER Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Bordeaux
RELEASE October 5

Assassin's Creed

by
Wesley LeBlanc

360, and it quickly became a hit, selling more than 8 million copies in less than a year and a half.

Ubisoft revealed last year that, following the success of 2020's *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (which took players to the Viking Age of England and made the company more than \$1 billion in revenue) the entire series had sold more than 200 million copies. That's a staggering number to be sure, even if it consists of more than two dozen main-line and spinoff games. However, the popularity of the series has ebbed and flowed. The *Assassin's Creed II* trilogy

starring Ezio Auditore is still considered the series' best by many, although for me, that title goes to *Assassin's Creed IV Black Flag*, with

Edward Kenway's swashbuckling high seas adventures.

But there's an entry for everyone; name a major period of history and there's a solid chance Ubisoft has you covered. Perhaps, at one point, too covered. Following 2015's *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, the company put the series on a hiatus, recognizing the exhaustive near-annual release schedule of the franchise and its effect on players. It returned two years later with a complete reimagining in *Assassin's Creed Origins*,

a sprawling open-world RPG set in Ancient Egypt. Given the time period, gone was the century-spanning conflict of Assassins versus Templars, replaced with their predecessors, the Hidden Ones and the Order of the Ancients.

Still, the conflict between these two orders and the fight over Isu technologies at the heart of it was dramatically downplayed in favor of a focus on the love and mutual parting of ways between protagonists Bayek and Aya. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* doubled down on this approach in 2018 and tripled down on it in 2020's *Valhalla*. I love *Origins* and *Odyssey* – I have more than 200 hours between them courtesy of my Platinum trophies in both. They were the changeup I desperately wanted for AC, a series I had followed since its start. But *Valhalla* left me exhausted, feeling like I had just a few years earlier with AC before *Origins* was released. And I wasn't alone.

Somehow, after growing tired of the smaller-scale AC games I had consumed for nearly a decade, I found myself yearning for their return. I wanted something smaller, faster, and, in comparison to the hundred-hour RPGs, bite-size. Then, *Assassin's Creed Mirage* was announced last year, and it seemed Ubisoft had been spying on my conversations.

Assassin's Creed was a bet for Ubisoft from the jump. It started as a sequel in the *Prince of Persia* series, namely a follow-up to arguably that series' most beloved entry, *The Sands of Time*. It gained its own identity as Ubisoft Montreal continued developing it, dropping the titular Prince from the game and focusing instead on an assassin. Fast forward to 2007, *Assassin's Creed* was released for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox



A smaller-scale AC void of RPG, stat-inundated mechanics. A renewed focus on the art of assassination and parkour. Plus, a distant Middle East setting starring Basim Ibn Is'haq, one of my favorite characters in Valhalla and master assassin mentor to protagonist Eivor? I was on board from the first trailer.

I traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to France, to visit Assassin's Creed Mirage developer Ubisoft Bordeaux and experience how it's leading the global company's charge in returning to its roots with this new entry. I learned firsthand how Mirage marries the feel of the open world RPGs and the classic blueprint, how it transformed from a large Valhalla expansion into its own game, the way Ubisoft stumbled onto a welcome reprieve courtesy of the franchise's 15-year anniversary, and how Mirage is Bordeaux's welcoming party.

Back to Basim and Basics

Roughly a year after the release of Valhalla, Bordeaux led development on the game's Wrath of the Druids expansion. Serving as a support studio since its inception in 2017, this DLC was the studio's first time leading a project. It must have gone swimmingly

because Ubisoft tapped Bordeaux to lead another unnamed, unannounced expansion set in the Middle East starring Basim.

With Basim revealed as the Norse trickster god Loki at the end of Valhalla, Ubisoft knew it still had plenty of blank pages to fill leading to Basim's meeting with Eivor in England, and it wanted to tap into that with DLC for the game. This idea lasted just a few weeks, though, before becoming a full-fledged title – sort of. Mirage will only cost \$50 at release, \$10 less than the usual Assassin's Creed price and \$20 less than the \$70 Ubisoft could likely charge for its next open-world RPG, Assassin's Creed Codename Red, set in Feudal Japan.

Creative director Stephane Boudon smiles playfully as he recalls the pitch for what is now Mirage with Ubisoft proper. While on paper, the pitch was for DLC, the team designed it with the idea of it being a full game just in case Ubisoft saw the potential Boudon and his Bordeaux counterparts did.

"It's funny because we did the full work for a pitch for a DLC, but at the end, we already saw on working on the pitch, it could be something else," he says. "So [we ended] our presentation with, 'but it can be more.' We pushed

a little bit for that, and it worked so it's been wonderful."

Mirage's pitch itself, both the DLC version and the now-full game, were dreamed up as one part distanced reimagining of the original AC, another part celebration of the franchise's 15-year legacy. Boudon says Bordeaux, as long-time fans of the series, wanted to go back to a Middle Eastern environment and the vibes of the game that started it all to celebrate how far it's come. That's immediately apparent at the start of my two hour hands-on session.

The Boat Heist

I'm dropped into the game's early hours, when Basim is just an Initiate in the Hidden Ones. I'm not given much narrative context at this point; only that Basim has returned from Alamut, the in-construction fortress of the Hidden Ones in Persia, with his thieving past behind him and a future of assassinations ahead of him. I pick up a contract called The Boat Heist from a Hidden Ones bureau in the northeastern Harbiyah district of Baghdad. My objective is simple: locate a boat within a small enemy stronghold and transport it to a specified location.



Before making my way, though, I re-familiarize myself with AC on the rooftops of Baghdad. I immediately understand the team's description of "modernized legacy gameplay." It still feels like Valhalla, using Ubisoft's proprietary Anvil engine, but uniquely different in its own ways, too. Basim is fast and agile, doubly so compared to the walking tank that Eivor is in Viking Age England. The world of Mirage feels less like a sprawling countryside of things I *can* climb and more like a densely packed cityscape playground with paths I *must* scale with parkour.

In Origins and Odyssey, and slightly less so in Valhalla, you can climb anything anywhere. It's fitting given the scope of the games and their overall objectives, but it feels stale in

retrospect after just two hours of time with Mirage. Baghdad feels hand-crafted to cater to Basim's parkour abilities, and that's by design, according to artistic director Jean-Luc Sala.

"That's part of the nostalgic experience," he says. "In some recent games, you were able to climb everything but originally, in the first game, you could not. You needed to find a way to climb. There was a puzzle [...] element; not just like, 'I'm here, I want to go there and straight ahead you reach your point.'"

Bringing back a singular central city allows Bordeaux to craft a parkour paradise more easily, too, Sala says. On top of the Harbiyah Hidden Ones bureau, I see ropes to zipline to the crowded streets below, clothesline-like wires to sneak across gaps, pulleys to ascend,

tree branches to jump through, and new poles to vault over large walkways. Basim executes these moves with fast and fluid animation, and he looks far more at home doing this than Eivor, Cassandra, or Bayek, too. Sala says the team paid special attention to his animations to ensure he felt like an assassin, down to the way Basim's robes move with every step.

"I wanted to keep that petal feel," Sala tells me. "When you jump, the robes are going a certain way. It's very iconic of what Altair was and I wanted to bring that back. Mixing that with medieval robes, which was already the intention of Altair [since] he was supposed to be a medieval knight in a way, and also a monk in his appearance. Of course, we cannot do exactly the same thing [with Basim] – we are earlier – but the ways in which robes were made in that Middle Eastern, middle age were very close so it was very easy to bring something that feels familiar but different. In every choice, if we have the choice between *this* and *that*, if one of the choices was more iconic, that was the obvious choice to make."

I parkour my way through Baghdad, utilizing paths world and quest director Simon Arseneault says are designed to make players feel like a parkour pro. I subconsciously stick to the rooftops, realizing the next day in conversation with Arseneault that I do exactly as Bordeaux intends.

"[Parkour] is one of the three pillars – stealth, parkour, and assassination," he says. "The feeling of parkour, especially in Assassin's Creed, comes from feeling cool, and for this, it needs to flow. The flow is really important. If you're stuck all the time, it doesn't work. When you want to go from one objective to another, there will often be multiple paths to that place. And if you fall, you will probably find another one and eventually end up at your goal. This parkour experience was designed with the idea that the rooftops are your playground. If you're on the rooftops, you can pretty much go anywhere you want."

He says you can go from any one location in Baghdad to another without touching the ground if you're good enough. Although, as I soon learn during



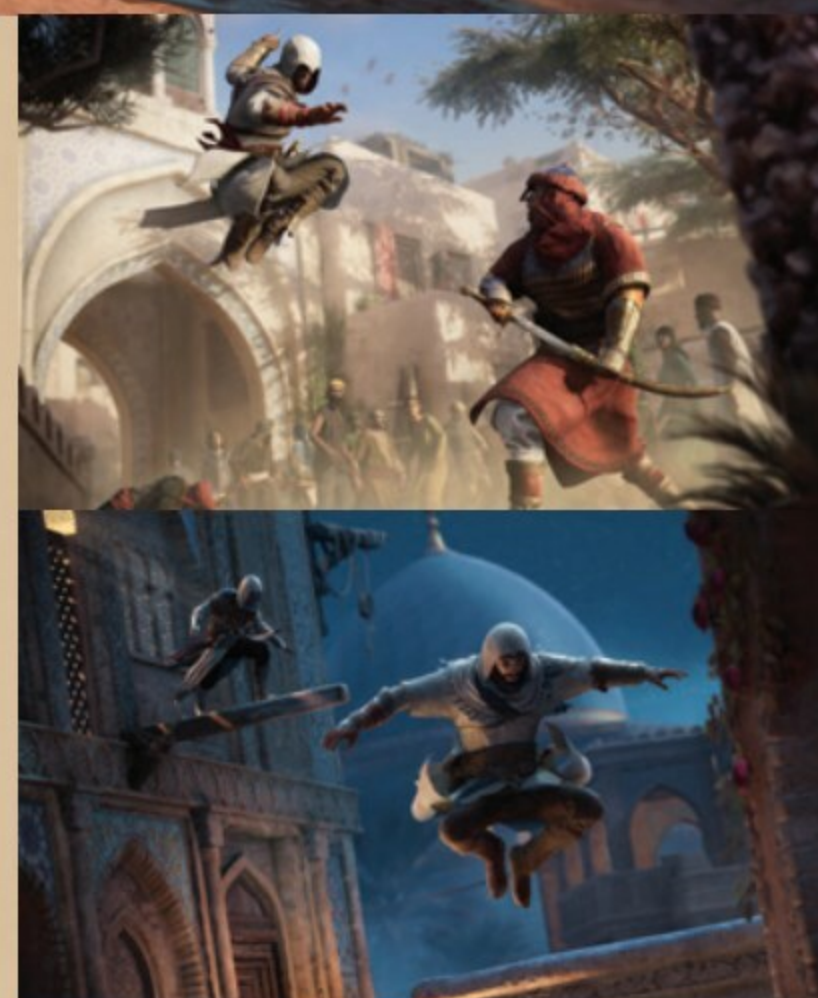


The Boat Heist contract, Bordeaux is generous with rooftop enemies. When I arrive at the location, a sub-objective appears: remain undetected. I use Basim's eyes-in-the-sky-bird Enkidu to scout the area and mark every enemy, of which there are many. This location, and even more so the next two I play, feel like vignettes. More Hitman than anything AC has done with the "assassin's" part of its name in years.

I watch enemies perform their patrols. One moves back and forth between an outer wall and some crates nearby, while a large guard I can only attack from behind weaves in and out of that same path. With two enemies on a roof above them, I use a trap to incapacitate the ones on my level, making them easy targets for a hidden blade kill. I climb up to the roof, lure one to me with a whistle, and dispose of them quickly before attacking the second who is now sitting on a stool, fidgeting with a weapon.

From up here, I spot a few more enemies and, as I make my way back down, I'm immediately spotted by another, failing my sub-objective. I reset my checkpoint as I want to remain undetected, this time using a throwing knife to make quick work of the enemy that spotted me last time. With this part of the stronghold clear, I head toward the boat, sneaking through vantage points for an aerial assassination before stabbing an enemy right through the back.

But I missed another walking nearby, breaking my undetected stealth once more. This time, I roll with it and it's here I discover the old style of AC combat is back. I have just a dagger and a sword for the entire Mirage experience. Gone are the bow and arrow I often used in Odyssey, the axes of Valhalla, and the pole spears of Origins. And with them goes the faster, more offensive style of combat, too. Instead, my best friend is the parry once more. Slashing at enemies shaves off small slivers of health, but after a parry I can instantly kill almost any standard enemy.



Basim Ibn Is'haq

Assassin Apprentice

Image Credits

- Astrolabe
- 9th century, North Africa
- The Khalili Collections
- Inventory Number SCI 430



Unlike older AC games, though, enemies don't haphazardly line up in wait for my parry-then-insta-kill combo. The A.I. is modernized and adopts the enemy habits of the RPGs, requiring fast-thinking parry hits and quick dodges for special unblockable moves. Enemies kill quickly, too. I die several times getting the hang of Basim's combative moves, and it's a welcome level of challenge. It's the best of both worlds, bringing back the challenge and enemy tactics of modern AC and marrying it with the older combat system. It works well here, and I would say it's what my rose-tinted memory thinks combat used to feel like if I didn't know any better.

I complete this contract with a smile; the same smile that stretches across my face after completing a great run in a Hitman game. This contract, like all the others, is one of the main pillars of Mirage's side content. They are completely optional, mind you, but after playing just the first, it feels like an essential part of the Basim assassin fantasy. I like that each contract is part of a larger set I can complete in any order to help different factions around Baghdad.

"The contracts are usually tied to factions or characters you've met in the main story," Arseneault says. "It's a way for us to expand a bit of their narrative."

It's also a great way to engage with Mirage outside of the main quests,

which is about Basim's journey from street thief to the master assassin we see in Valhalla, and the investigative pillar of the experience, centering on discovering members of the Order of the Ancients and killing them. Arseneault says you can pick up all the available quests at once and complete them in any order. I like the idea of collecting many missions and knocking them out when I'm near one, either while exploring the city or following the main storyline.

The Concubine

The second contract, The Concubine, places me mid-game, and Basim's loadout reflects that. It's the contract previously shown during a Ubisoft Forward earlier this summer, except I'm playing it at a different time of day. A big part of the Mirage experience comes in the form of perks and bonuses earned from upgrades. An outfit, which is the full robe attire that can be customized to my liking using special dyes reminiscent of ACII, can be upgraded to include things like a 50% noise reduction during assassinations. Costumes, equippable in a different menu, cannot be altered, though, as they are specific to quests. Bordeaux wouldn't share more, but I imagine an instance where Basim must wear a guard's outfit to sneak into a palace, which unlocks that outfit for me to use anytime afterward.



Roshan

Master Assassin

Basim's sword and dagger can be upgraded to feature perks like a 50% attack bonus after a successful parry, but most upgrades apply to his tools. Throwing knives, traps, noisemakers, smoke bombs, and darts have upgrade tiers that require specific materials and resources found on bodies, in chests, and lying around Baghdad. Tier 1 might improve overall efficiency, but each upgrade also opens new perks. You can select one perk per tier, ultimately giving each tool three active perks at once. My poison knife might slowly kill enemies, but I can also select a perk that allows me to charge up the throw for increased distance and damage. The noisemaker can include a perk that induces terror, and its overall range can be increased too.

"We're trying to make everyone play what Basim was like when he was young and instead of giving you freedom for how he evolves, we're giving you more freedom in how you play," Arseneault says. "So it's about how you evolve your tools because that's something we didn't have as Eivor. Now we have tools so we can evolve them and customize them more. We can do the same with the perks for the outfits. But he's not changing because he will always end up as the master assassin [seen in Valhalla]."

It's easy to see how different outfit bonuses interact with various tool perks, and I look forward to min-maxing different loadouts based on the objectives before me. The noisemaker, in particular, comes in handy with The Concubine contract. I must infiltrate the Prince's Palace and take out its leader, and my sub-objective is to take zero damage. It looks easy on paper, but upon arriving at the location, I'm immediately at a disadvantage: a marksman somewhere in the compound watches the skies, and I can't summon Enkidu to scout enemies as a result.

My mission begins with a hunt for this marksman. I locate him high on a watch tower and because I can't just climb anything, I have to figure out a path up to him without being spotted, lest he warns the entire palace I'm here. Parkouring through the city is good fun, and the focus is on fluidity and continual movement. But I especially



enjoy climbing synchronization points or watchtowers like this, because the path forward remains hidden, turning what might have been a quick and easy climb for Cassandra into a puzzle that needs solving for Basim.

After taking out the marksman, I scout out the remaining enemies with Enkidu, spotting the concubine being held hostage at the center of the palace.

Reaching him is no easy task; five guards surround him and even more surround the outside perimeter. I perform a leap of faith into a flowerbed inside the walls of the courtyard and quickly assassinate a nearby enemy, then tap one button to throw a knife at another nearby guard using Basim's new chain assassination ability. I hide one body in the flowerbed and another in a hiding cabinet.





Unfortunately, I fail to recognize that it's not just me and guards here, but various others at work and because they see what I do, my notoriety rises. I take out a few more guards sneakily, this time using a noisemaker to attract three into one spot before using Basim's Assassin Focus to eliminate all of them in one quick go.

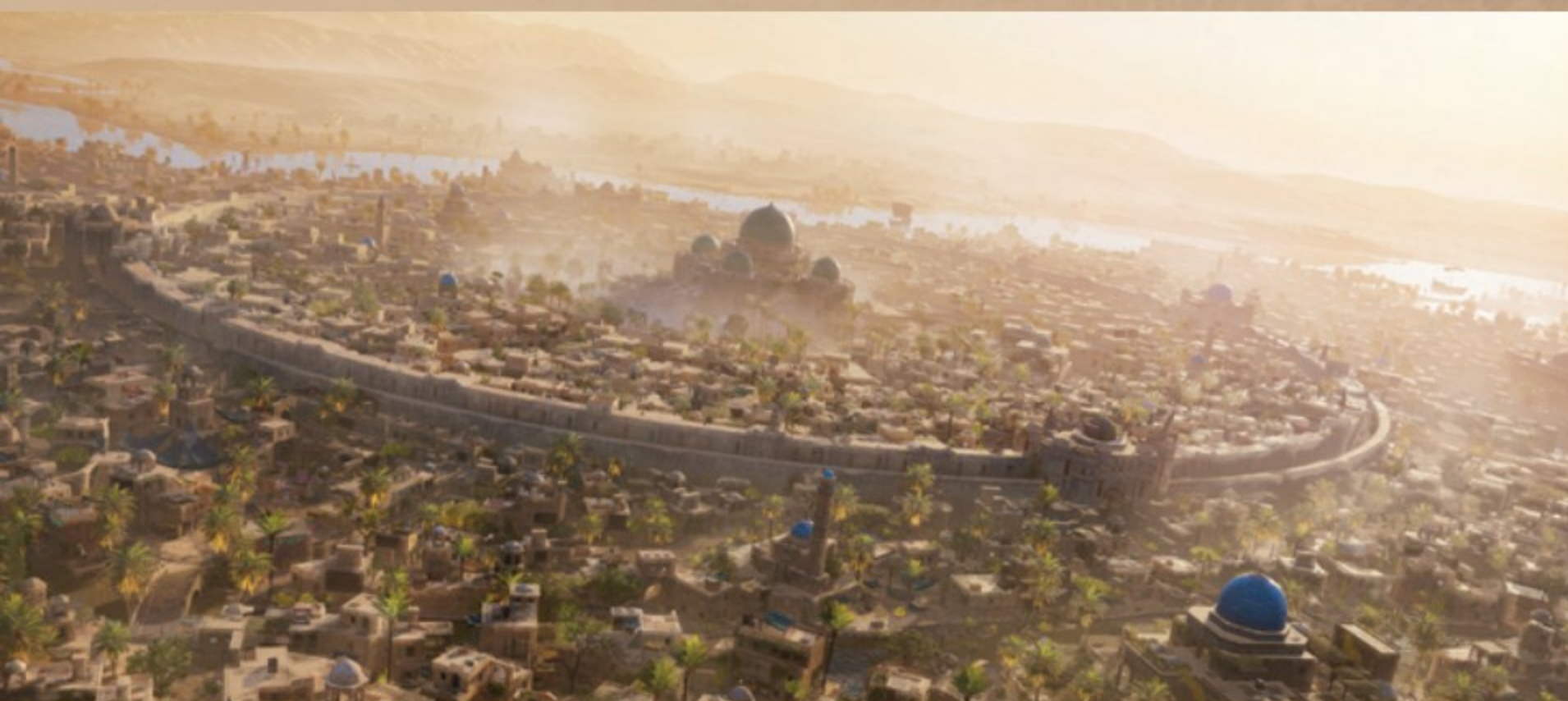
Assassin Focus looks unnatural, like Basim glitching in a matrix, but that's intentional, Boudon says. He's glitching in the animus, the series' stand-in for a matrix-like machine. Basim is so efficient and fast that the animus can't keep up, which explains narratively how he's able to teleport from guard to guard with no regard for real-world physics. It's a neat ability and one I rely on heavily to take out swaths of enemies at once. To fill the Assassin Focus bars, though, you must take out enemies stealthily, which prevents me from overusing the skill in a single run.

Taking out these foes with this ability fills my notoriety and I then meet the elite Shakiriyya guard, who hunts Basim anytime his notoriety is full. Put simply, this guard ruins my entire plan; he damages me, and I fail the sub-objective, and with him goes any possibility of returning to stealth with ease. He hunts me down and inflicts a ton of damage, and what I do in return pales in comparison. I do eventually take him down, but it takes minutes and catches the attention of other guards, turning a one-on-one fight into a seven-on-one battle. I like the interactivity between notoriety (which is always in play), the elite Shakiriyya guard, and his entrance into what I thought was a closed-off section for the contract. It's proof that Baghdad is a living, breathing world and that these contract vignettes aren't isolated incidents separate from the rest of the city like I previously thought.

"It's part of the pillar of being in a city," Arseneault says. "If you were only feeling the city by missions, it feels like you're not in a city when you play. As soon as you bring in more of the systems inside the quest, and this is especially true for the contracts, it makes it way more lively, and now an error you made 15 minutes ago can hunt you down. And it can encourage how you play. By going with the systemic route, we make it way more alive. It makes it, 'Okay, I'm not playing a game, I'm in that city now. I'm really living with Basim [and experiencing] how he could have lived.'"

In order to lower my notoriety, I can use one of three tokens – in this instance, the Power Token – to bribe Munadi, city speakers reminiscent of heralds in other ACs. I can rip wanted posters off walls, although I need to do that discreetly, so citizens don't warn nearby guards of what I've done. I can use Merchant Tokens to purchase exclusive items





from specific sellers and Scholar Tokens to, for example, ask street entertainers to distract guards. Sala tells me these three tokens are a nod to the various currencies used in Baghdad under the control of the Abbasid Caliphate during this time period.

Notoriety feels more important in *Mirage* than any AC before it – the effects of my rising infamy are immediately stressful, and I laugh out loud seeing more than two dozen guards chase after me at one point. As you might guess, it doesn't end well for Basim. It's another way *Mirage* emphasizes the importance of the shadows and remaining, well, a hidden one, as it were. Stealth really feels like a key pillar in its gameplay, and it hasn't been this necessary as a part of the game's mechanics in years.

I eventually lower my notoriety enough that I'm able to sneak into the main area of the Prince's Palace and take the leader and his various guards

out using my Assassin Focus. That's not the end, though, as I must now sneak back into the city to complete the contract. I see here that I could have completed the contract by rushing to the target, but doing so would have left me swaths of alerted guards attempting to stop my exit. I like feeling pushed to think not just about the assassination, but the escape afterward too.

The Slave Trapper

This brings me to the third and final contract of my playtime: The Slave Trapper. I begin by locating a local informant in a nearby market and soon after, my objective is to tail this person and eventually eavesdrop on

their conversations. If this instance is anything to go on, *Bordeaux* has taken a heavily criticized mechanic in tailing and made it something worth including in an AC once again. I can just follow him slowly as I might in *Black Flag*'s various poorly executed tailing missions, but I notice a path on the right through the nearby rooftops, littered with a few soldiers to kill too. With this path, tailing is now a fun parkour run instead of a slow walk toward an end goal.

I then sit on a nearby bench to eavesdrop on the informant, which is how I learn the location of the slave trapper: The Great Garrison, a massive fortress with easily 30 or more guards. Infiltrating this fortress takes time and many hidden assassinations because reaching the inside with a low notoriety level feels like a must to avoid an untimely confrontation with the Shakiriyyah elite.

Once inside, I use Enkidu to mark as many enemies as I can see, and then I get to work. By this point, I'm confident in my abilities as Basim; it helps I have more tools with better perks and more Assassin Focus bars – I can kill five at once now – as this save file is from a late-game portion of *Mirage*. Once inside, I move from enemy to enemy like a snake, combo-ing chain



Alī ibn
Muhammad

Leader of the Zanj rebellion





assassinations with corrosive poison knives that cause bodies to disappear on kills. I use noisemakers to distract guards in my way and smoke bombs to dip back into stealth when I accidentally alert an enemy. It helps to have the Mindwipe perk on the smoke bombs too, as this makes all in the radius forget I exist. I drop from high above onto enemies below and use pulleys to launch Basim back up to the roofs where I'm most comfortable.

The Slave Trapper feels the most like the open world RPGs, simply because the target location is so massive and sprawling with enemies in every direction. There are many resources to

collect and chests to open inside, too, and the garrison is like a miniature city or sandbox within the larger surrounding district. But sneaking through a place like this using Bordeaux's take on the series' legacy gameplay feels like the original vision of the first game come to fruition.

"I think we succeed with having a perfect mix of the legacy of Assassin's Creed inside the city, but also giving a little bit of freedom when you can go outside Baghdad," Sala says. "By using the technology of the larger open world [games], we succeed in having the same kind of feeling you had in Assassin's Creed 1 [...] with more freedom."

Building Baghdad

It's clear after my hands-on time with *Mirage* that none of this throwback experience would work without Baghdad at the center of everything. The city is alive with commerce and citizenry, due to it being the technological epicenter of the Middle East at the time. A massive palace within the Round City is the centerpiece, and I'm excited to see what secrets and parkour avenues it holds for me in the final release. But its surrounding districts, bazaars, schools, and more are just as entertaining to see as Basim runs around from objective to objective.

I spend a third of my time during these contracts exploring the areas surrounding the objective location, at first to get a feel for the city and then because I simply want more of it. Perhaps it's nostalgia speaking, but *Mirage* feels particularly Assassin's Creed-y because of Baghdad and the game's renewed focus on a single location to explore. It's digestible once again, and I can intimately learn and memorize Baghdad in a way I didn't with any of the cities in the last three AC games.

Sala leads Bordeaux's art team in bringing Baghdad to life with the help of a miniature library strewn across his desk and the desks of those who work nearby, and an expert historian. When he joined the studio a few years ago, he didn't know *Mirage* was set in Baghdad, but he says the job was like stars aligning.



Nehal

Basim's best friend

"I grew up on the other side of the Tigris River," Sala tells me, remarking that he lived in Iran before the Iranian Revolution in 1979. "It was really intimate for me to know that I was going to work on this city. It's not a city I know, because I'm not old enough to have lived there in the 9th Century, but the sun, the light, the people [...] I knew them and I wanted to be true to that kind of memory."

With *Mirage* set in 861, Sala's team had to recreate a city that no longer exists: the Golden Age Baghdad that was destroyed by a Mongol invasion in 1258. He says the team built "a paradise lost," and that celebrating the part of his life when he lived in this region has been an emotional journey.

One exciting aspect of rebuilding Baghdad was shedding new light on a city now perhaps better known for its association with the U.S.'s war in Iraq and television and movie clichés.

"When you work on Vikings, everyone has an idea of what the Viking Age should be," Sala tells me, explaining the training everyone went through to better understand 9th Century Baghdad and the culture of the region. "It's hard to find some real truth to what [Baghdad] was. Every time, it's just idealized or cliché-esque in a way so it was a really nice challenge to find [...] something fresh and true for people."

Legacy

Sala says the team worked hard to make it feel familiar to the first AC as well, since *Mirage* is meant to celebrate the 15-year anniversary, while still holding its own identity. A big part of that was examining the role of architecture in gameplay. It dictates how players might climb, how they might engage with stealth, where they might fight, and even what catches their eye on the horizon of rooftops.

Each person I spoke to, even in off-hand remarks, spoke with reverence to the series' entire history. Of course, they do work for Ubisoft, and I spoke to them in their office of employment, but they love this series. People like Sala had dreamed of working on this franchise one day, and that love of both the series' celebration of real-world history and the history of the series itself shines through in a lot of what I experience.

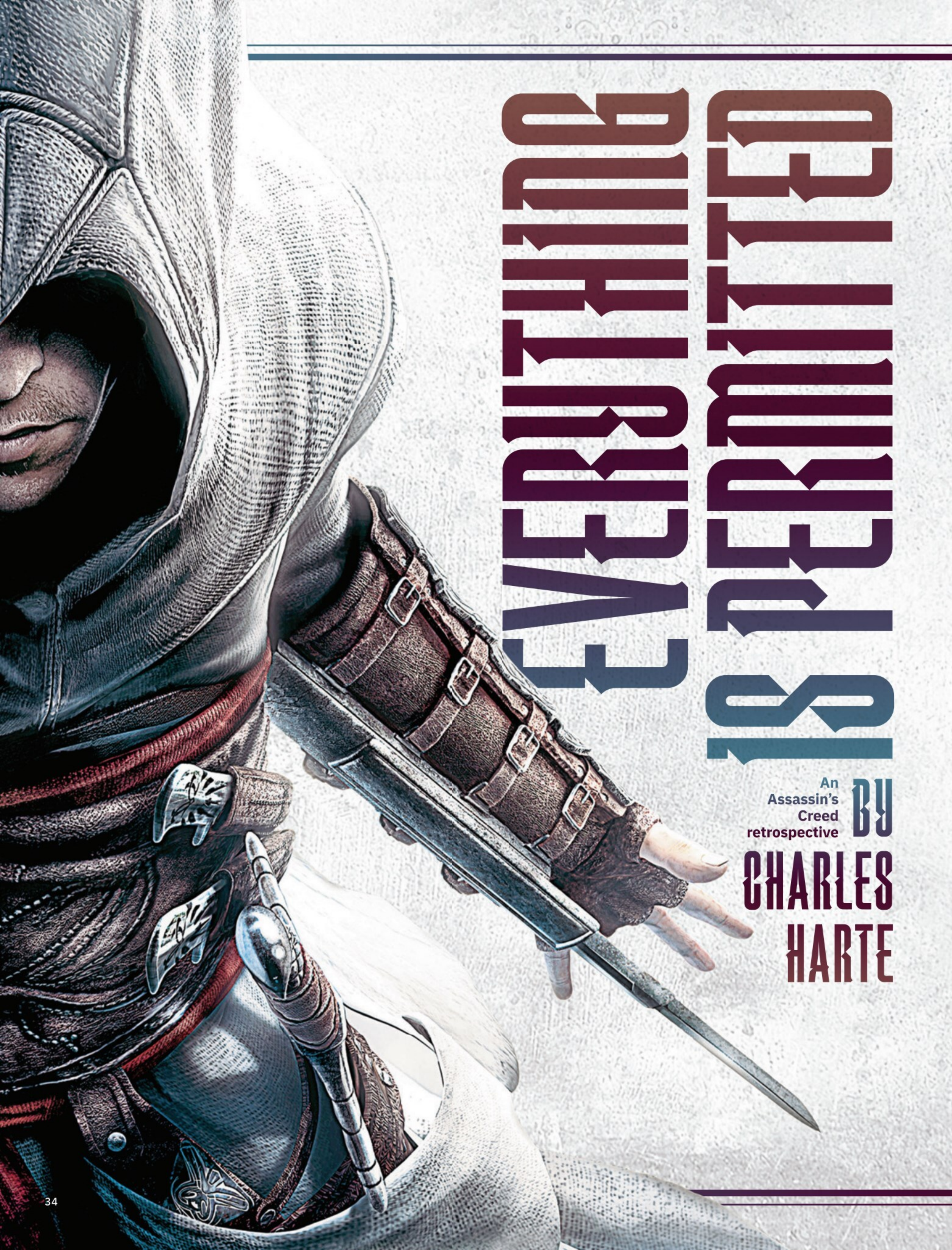
Mirage isn't a remake of AC, nor is it a straight reimagining. It takes what the series is today and remolds it, briefly, for a dip into what this franchise once

was. It will feel familiar to people who have only played the open-world RPGs, or even just *Valhalla* – it was birthed as a DLC for that game, after all. But it will feel just as familiar for those who remember what AC was once. Boudon sums it up best, explaining the team didn't necessarily attempt to make *Mirage* feel like Altair's adventure, but rather the emotions players felt in 2007 and the way they feel today when thinking back on that game.

"We are tied to the creed and to a long-time philosophy of Assassin's Creed, so we stay true to that," Boudon says. "We wanted to really respect the franchise, but maybe in *Mirage*, you will see a message that is, 'Okay, legacy is important. Following the legacy is important, but at some point, we must hammer in our own legacy and create our own paths in it.' We do that with the story of Basim, the studio, and the franchise." ■

For video interviews, additional features, and more, visit GameInformer.com/AssassinsCreedMirage





EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

An
Assassin's
Creed
retrospective **BY**
**CHARLES
HARTE**

The Assassin's Creed series is one of a handful of triple-A franchises successful enough to warrant yearly releases. In the 13 years between the original game and Assassin's Creed Valhalla, only 2008, 2016, and 2019 came and went without new releases. In fact, in 2014, Ubisoft even put out two entries on the same day.

While the series established a niche for itself early on, it ended up growing and evolving into something entirely new. This year's Assassin's Creed Mirage represents a return to form, but there's a lot to learn about that form itself and why Ubisoft deviated from it in the first place.

In preparation for Mirage, I spent the first half of the year playing every entry in Ubisoft's flagship series. Here's a recap of every mainline game in Assassin's Creed history.

Assassin's Creed (2007)

Assassin's Creed is about a centuries-long struggle between the freedom-loving Assassins and the order-driven Templars. Eventually, the groups spread worldwide and secretly infiltrate every corner of the globe. But in the first game (set in 1192), they are each proudly public groups, complete with insignias, uniforms, and fortresses. The way the player initially experiences these stories is through the eyes of Desmond Miles, a man in 2012 kidnapped and forced to feed information to modern-day Templars using an Animus, a machine allowing one to relive their ancestors' memories. Desmond's first foray into an Animus follows Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, his Assassin ancestor from the Crusades.

In addition to establishing the foundations of the series' lore, the 2007 entry gives us our taste of the basic gameplay formula that'd become commonplace in the years to come. Altaïr can scale most buildings and leap across rooftops to explore an open-world environment using the franchise's signature parkour mechanics. There's a heavy emphasis on stealth, but surprisingly no crouch button. Instead, Assassin's Creed uses social stealth, which allows the player to remain undetected as long as they're within a crowd. Using your hidden blade, you can sneak in, assassinate your target, and sneak out, all in plain sight.

Assassin's Creed feels simple by today's standards, but it's fun to look back on years later. It laid the foundation of the franchise.

But the next entries would refine it into something special.





The Ezio Trilogy

When most people think of Assassin's Creed, they think of Ezio Auditore, the protagonist from Assassin's Creed II, Brotherhood, and Revelations. Throughout the three games, he grows from a lovable scoundrel to the leader of the Italian Assassins to a grey-haired traveler looking for answers. In addition to this iconic arc, Ezio's games enhanced and modified the gameplay formula from its predecessor, ultimately crafting a series of games that are more intuitive and satisfying.

Meanwhile, in the modern-day storyline, Desmond escapes confinement. He works with other Assassins to stop Abstergo (the front company for the modern Templar movement) and a mysterious apocalyptic event that eventually comes to pass in Assassin's Creed III. This trilogy represents the height of the modern-day storyline.

While Altaïr was the first Assassin, Ezio's influence on every following game can't be overstated. Because he's the franchise's gold standard, every future protagonist exists in conversation with him, either by fitting into his mold or breaking out of it. That said, by the time Revelations was released in 2011, Ezio was overstaying his welcome. For several reasons, his third game wasn't received nearly as well as the first two, and Ubisoft would have to come to terms with a huge challenge: how do you follow him up?

The North American Trilogy

The next trio of games isn't officially a trilogy, but they all take place in North America during the 18th century and share an engine. Assassin's Creed III, Black Flag, and Rogue form a crucial, pivotal era where Ubisoft had to figure out what to do with the universe after leaving their golden child behind. The results are mixed but fascinating.

Broadly speaking, Assassin's Creed III was received poorly, Black Flag was beloved, and Rogue fell somewhere in the middle. In addition to pacing issues and a divisive protagonist, III abruptly ended Desmond's story, leaving the future of the modern-day arc in question. That question was one Black Flag and Rogue largely ignored, instead passing modern-day quests off to nameless, faceless employees of Abstergo that are roped into helping the Assassins and Templars.

By far, the most popular innovation from this era was its naval combat and exploration. There just weren't any other games at the time allowing for the kind of swashbuckling action present in all three titles. It was so popular that it inspired Ubisoft to spin the mechanic into an upcoming release, Skull & Bones. Recent reports have also suggested that a remake of Black Flag is in the works.





Unity & Syndicate

The next two games in the series feel linked as well – they have the most modern historical settings, mark another jump in engine, and are the last “traditional” entries. The North American trilogy was a time of experimentation and growth, enabled by the Ezio trilogy’s cultural footprint. But Assassin’s Creed Unity (released the same day as Rogue, though on different platforms) and Syndicate were collective proof that the series had to change.

While Unity has amassed its share of fans over the years, its launch was the most tumultuous of the series; it was so glitchy that Ubisoft offered free games to everyone that bought it, hoping to lessen potential backlash. Even beneath the performance issues, the game is hit or miss for fans. Notably, it doubled down on RPG mechanics, locking abilities behind skill points and creating a heavy reliance on gear.

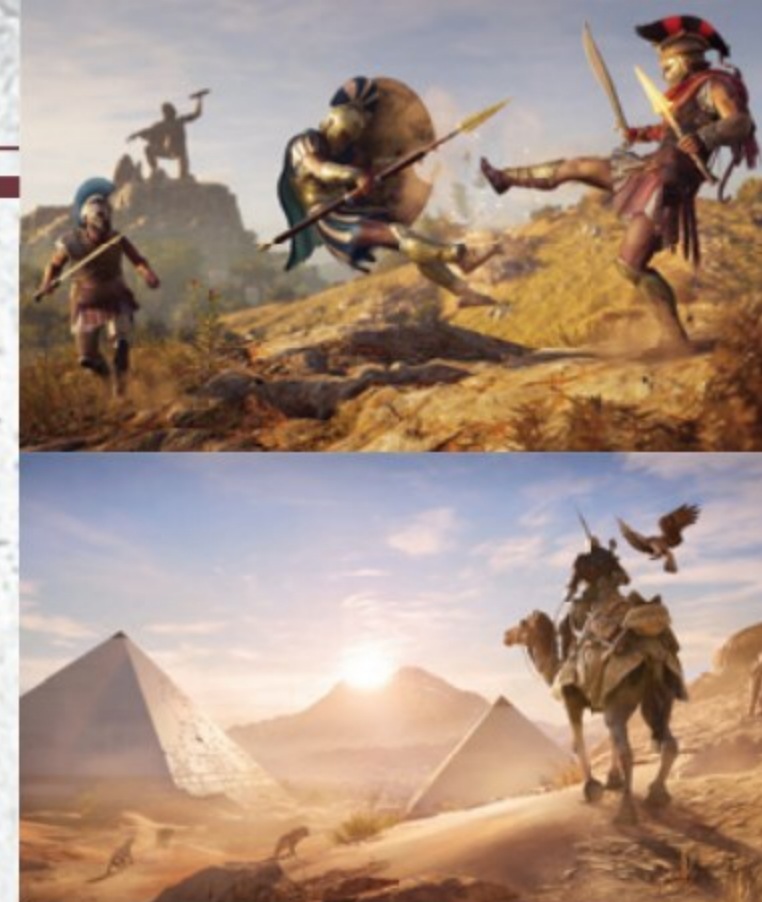
The next year, Syndicate improved Unity’s template, launching with fewer glitches, improved combat, and RPG mechanics integrated more smoothly. But while this game was much more of a critical success, Unity had tarnished the series’ reputation. It didn’t sell nearly as well as its predecessor, and some complained the franchise felt stale. As a result, Ubisoft stepped back from yearly releases. 2016 was the first year since 2008 without an Assassin’s Creed game. The series needed to pivot – and this would be its biggest revision yet.

The Mythology Trilogy

The most recent era of Assassin’s Creed, starting with Assassin’s Creed Origins, completely shattered the status quo. Taking place in the Ptolemaic era of Ancient Egypt, Origins jumped backward nearly 2,000 years from Syndicate’s setting. It de-emphasized stealth, massively expanded the open world, and focused more on RPG mechanics, like a big skill tree and weapon loot. In many fundamental ways, it defied the core design philosophies of the earlier games, which made it hugely successful.

After Origins, the series went back even further with Assassin’s Creed Odyssey, set in ancient Greece before the Assassin organization was founded. The game was more massive, had more RPG features, and allowed you to choose your gender at the start of the game. Odyssey even ditched the iconic white hood and hidden blade. It’s one of the most beloved entries in the series, up there with II and Black Flag.

With Assassins Creed Valhalla, the fresh formula established by Origins was cemented as the new standard for Assassin’s Creed: huge open worlds littered with side quests, loot, and enemy camps to ambush to increase your level (not unlike the formula Ubisoft had been leaning on with its other mainline series, Far Cry and Watch Dogs). In the Mythology Trilogy, roleplay is king – your stories as a player are just as important as those in the campaign, and the games are built to facilitate that storytelling.



While these games differ greatly from their predecessors, they’re also widely beloved by fans and critics. Still, others were unsatisfied with the direction the franchise had turned. Dense cities, parkour, stealth, and the general presence of the Assassins had greatly diminished. While there are far more entries in the traditional style, it’s been eight years since a game in that mold was released. At the same time, it’s clear why the pivot was necessary. Assassin’s Creed grew stagnant, especially when a new game was released every fall for seven consecutive years.

Replaying a decade and a half of Assassin’s Creed games was kind of like my own personal Animus experience. By reliving the past, I could better understand the series’ direction in the present. It’s not afraid to evolve, and with the release of Mirage, it’s not scared of looking back. With nearly 16 years behind it and plenty planned for the future, Assassin’s Creed has earned its place as one of the most iconic franchises in gaming. ■



LESSONS LEARNED

Reevaluating and revisiting
Cyberpunk 2077 with **Phantom Liberty**

by **Kyle
Hilliard**

PLATFORM **PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC**

STYLE **1-Player Role-Playing**

PUBLISHER **CD Projekt**

DEVELOPER **CD Projekt Red**

RELEASE **September 26**





The 2020 launch of *Cyberpunk 2077* was terrible. Anticipation reached a point that no reasonable game could meet. *Cyberpunk* could have potentially grappled with those lofty expectations, but the major problem was its technical proficiency – or lack thereof. Despite the game getting good reviews (a product of press only being given PC copies) for most players, the game crashed frequently or was riddled with bugs. The PlayStation 4 version was pulled from shelves and taken offline. The content of the game – the story, the characters, the mechanics – was barely discussed in the face of players struggling even to explore the neon-soaked streets of Night City. It was a disaster, and fingers were pointed in many directions at developer/publisher CD Projekt toward myriad culprits. Management pushed the game out too early, the developers were working on an ultimately impossible task, or maybe marketing just raised expectations unfairly.

In truth, there is no one singular issue that sank the public's first interaction with *Cyberpunk 2077*. And since then, CD Projekt has been working hard to push the game in the right direction. *Cyberpunk* has received numerous updates addressing bugs and improving mechanics. Studio Trigger's anime adaptation, *Cyberpunk: Edge-runners*, inspired players to engage with the setting and lore of the world at a level they simply couldn't at launch. CD Projekt has been fixing its massive first-person shooter, open-world RPG for the last three years, but *Phantom Liberty* is the biggest update the game has received yet. It represents an opportunity for many to give *Cyberpunk 2077* another shot, bring in new players, and see if it can finally live up to the impossible expectations. Quest director Paweł Sasko and art directors Jakub Knapik and Paweł Mielniczuk know this and are eager for players to see what the team has been hard at work on.



.../KNOWLEDGE.GAINED

After *Cyberpunk*'s launch, the team looked hard at the game and its internal development processes. Releasing a video game in the state that *Cyberpunk 2077* was in is not a mistake it ever wanted to repeat.

"The list of things we learned after the release is massive, and we will not be able to go through all that," Mielniczuk says. Internally, CD Projekt upended its game development processes, which was expectedly a difficult thing to do. "It wasn't easy transforming the entire company," Mielniczuk says. "Reinventing the way we're making games took us a lot of time."

Working on the expansion and updates, though, is generally easier. *Cyberpunk 2077* and its engine were developed simultaneously, which Mielniczuk says was like trying to build an airplane's engine while it is flying.

The reception for *Cyberpunk* at launch was disheartening and took a toll on the team. "We were dead," Knapik says and I ask him what he means by that. "We were coping with the situation," Knapik says. "We were dead inside," Mielniczuk clarifies. Morale was low.

CD Projekt decided on a few directions. Some people would work on the next-gen update and other various updates, others would focus on the *Phantom Liberty* expansion, and then there was the process of restructuring and improving morale. Measured happiness became a metric for success, alongside factors like making sure deadlines and milestones were hit on time.

It also helped that with the release of the game, the process of developing the game became much smoother. The plane's engine was finally complete (if still in need of continued maintenance), so it was easier to focus on the creative side of development. The original game, for example, could not be played in full until about 80-90% of the development was complete, Mielniczuk says. In contrast, a playable beginning-to-end version of *Phantom Liberty* was available after about a month of active development.

"We are so much more in sync nowadays," Sasko says. Previously, CD Projekt took a waterfall approach to development. The game was planned out in full early, and then development started. "Simplifying, it's an approach when one person works after another," Sasko says. Now, the team

has switched to an agile approach to development. “Really, it took us many months, if not maybe a year after the launch, to really get it to the point we actually knew what we were doing.” With agile development, work is done more in tandem. Teams overlap more, and changes are made early as needed. “It’s more like we work together to ship that thing, and the patches that you have seen already are a product of that,” Sasko says. And that change did not just affect *Cyberpunk 2077* development. Everyone made the pivot. “It affected, of course, the *Polaris Project*, the new *Witcher*. It affected *Project Hadar*. It affected other departments that are not primarily dev teams, but they’re working with us, like, for instance, PR, [communications], and marketing.”

It’s the kind of shift that seems widespread but also the kind of change that players can’t see. The proof of improvement will be in the product, so it was time to check out the expansion with Sasko as my guide.

.../BACK.TO.NIGHT.CITY

My play session began – as it does for any post-release addition to any video game – by reacquainting with the controls. The most difficult part of revisiting a game years after your original play session, and without a tutorial, is remembering how everything works. I was not able to take my personal character into this demo. I missed my female version of protagonist V, who exclusively drove the *Akira*-inspired Yaiba Kusanagi CT-3X and only wore red to get her outfit as close to *Akira* protagonist Kaneda’s as she could. But thankfully, the V in my demo session felt and sounded the same. My V is a character who likes to hack enemies from a distance and is also nimble on her feet. For *Phantom Liberty*, I chose a build that lacked the emphasis on hacking but retained maneuverability.

The demo begins with a call from Songbird, a New United States intelligence analyst. Songbird knows about

your situation and the ticking time bomb in your head. She doesn’t detail how or why she wants to help you (or how she knows) but implies she can save your life if you help her. The conversation makes it clear *Phantom Liberty* is integrated into the main narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077*. It is not a separate story or one that takes place after the game’s conclusion. With that understanding, however, if you are a new player who wants to hang out with Idris Elba’s character, Solomon Reed, you can skip directly to the expansion content. If you are a returning player who wants to start fresh, that’s an option, too. And if you plan to load up your Yaiba Kusanagi CT-3X riding, red leather jack-wearing V, *Phantom Liberty* also accounts for you.

“There are some players that basically finished the game a long time ago, forgot about it, and uninstalled it, sadly,” Sasko says. “We took care of that player too.” You can, of course, replay the game if you want, but there is another option. “You can pick ‘skip forward’ and what will happen is it will sort of simulate the state of your save game.”

Songbird is aboard *Space Force One* alongside New United States president Rosalind Myers when she calls you. A mysterious hacker has changed their destination and they are headed for a crash land in Dogtown, a new area of Night City you couldn’t explore in the main game. Dogtown is low on both resources and authority. If Night City was inspired by anime like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Akira*, Dogtown is inspired by the apocalyptic *Escape from New York* – or at least the opening mission is. It’s a dangerous place for anyone to be, much less a person at the highest level of political power. “The president’s life, her safety – that’s your top priority,” Songbird tells you.

.../OLD.HAUNTS/NEW.PLACE

The demo officially begins with V entering Dogtown’s Black Market. At first glance, it feels familiar. Explicit, suggestive ads are plastered on every monetizable surface, and entirely too many people are milling about.





A woman near a weapon store is trying to attract everyone's attention in front of a bipedal mech. I inspect the store, and the man behind the counter's face is heavily modified. He doesn't have a jaw and speaks with an electronic voice.

Browsing the shop's options, I see the U.I. has been adjusted to help you compare weapons and make it easier to determine if there are any worth purchasing compared to the ones you already own. A new Tier system also defines the general level of every weapon. "This shop actually allows you as a player to buy iconic weapons that we have missed in the story," Sasko says. This is a nice option considering you can lock yourself out of acquiring certain weapons in the main game depending on how you play. Additionally, Sasko notes that every weapon in the game has been rebalanced. "That's a lot of work," Sasko laughs.

Before diving into Phantom Liberty's story proper, Sasko suggests I meet the local Ripperdoc to see what changes have been made to upgrading your body. Many of the same options exist, like changing out elements of your frontal cortex, arms, skeleton, and

more, but they're all laid out in a more understandable way. Hovering over the pieces of Cyberware shows all kinds of new effects and options. There are also new meters.

The yellow meter on the left is a capacity system that visualizes how much Cyberware your body can use. There are also new, unlockable perks associated with it. One of the currently locked perks is called Edgerunner, an overt reference to the anime of the same name. "If you have the Edgerunner perk, you can actually push your body to the limit," Sasko says. In the anime, characters would experience Cyberpsychosis if they over-upgraded their bodies and pushed themselves too far. "We are not going as far as introducing the full Cyberpsychosis, but what we are doing is introducing a system where you as a player need to basically choose between the risk and the reward when you can feel overpowered."

On the right side of the screen is a new blue armor meter. "We have moved all of the armor from clothing to Cyberware," Sasko says. This is a significant change because it means

you can now wear whatever you want and retain the armor stats you've earned. No longer will you have to contend with the low armor stats of a red leather jacket you insist on wearing to play out your *Akira* video game fantasy at the expense of lower stats. Sasko says the change was also made in an effort to make the player feel more like a true Cyberpunk. In the player head-canon, changing your body to absorb more bullet fire rather than changing your pants is just more in line with the game's fantasy.

.../LORE.OPTIONAL

I don't collect any new upgrades right now. The president needs saving, after all. Songbird has some of the same communication abilities as Johnny Silverhand, who is fully present in the expansion with an upgraded character model and all-new dialogue from Keanu Reeves. Sasko says the story will offer more insight into Johnny's past, which is something I do experience in a small way over the course of my playtime.

Songbird appears in the environment, visible only to me like Silverhand, and directs me to get up high. Dogtown is a large subsection of Night City, but its most impressive landmark is a converted sports stadium I must climb. As I make my way up, I get a fantastic view of the Badlands in the distance, Dogtown, and the dilapidated stadium residents have turned into a home. "[The stadium] was being built during the fourth corporate war, but then the war started, and a lot of financiers backed out, so it was left half done and broken," Sasko says, speaking faster and faster as he makes his way through the sentence. "Lore is cool, but we have lots of things to play."

Sasko's quick lore explanation encapsulates what Cyberpunk is and how players interact with it. The lore is dense and available if you want to read into it, but you can also rush past all that and play it as a shooter, a stealth game, a driving game, or a conversation game.

I don't take in the view for long before Space Force One crashes in the distance, and Songbird fizzles out of my view. She is on the ship, so it makes sense that she would suddenly disappear. Partly because I am still re-learning the controls and partly because Cyberpunk allows for player agency in how they approach scenarios, I sneak my way to the wreckage using new upgraded melee and stealth combat abilities, including blocking with a sword to deflect bullets. Enemies are crawling over the wreckage, and at this stage, I'm not sure why. Some might be scavengers responding to the chaos, but there are plenty of uniformed enemies, too. There are also robots and drones defending the missing president, and I lean on them to distract my opponents while I get on board the downed ship.

Songbird is on the comms with me when I finally find President Myers, a tough woman who, understandably, attacks me the moment I open a door to find her. An explosion knocks us both out, and I am fast-forwarded to a section a little later in the expansion where Myers and I have found safety in an abandoned apartment in Dogtown. The plan is to wait there for Songbird. President Myers finds new clothes to change into to avoid recognition while I look for how to turn on the power. It's here that Silverhand steps in to share his thoughts about the situation. True to his nature, Silverhand doesn't trust the president (he doesn't do well with authority) and has a bad feeling about the whole situation. He also makes a great point about Songbird offering a surely too-good-to-be-true cure-all for your brain bomb. "Got this hot, itchy feelin' in my groin - like someone's not 'fessed up to somethin'," Silverhand says, undoubtedly quoting his song lyrics.

After the fiery crash and shoot-out, this section is a moment of reprieve. Myers, now dressed in an "I heart NC" baseball cap and surprisingly stylish clothes for some rags she found in an abandoned hideout, turns on the

radio, and we get a taste of Phantom Liberty's political intrigue. The news covers the crash and Myers' unknown whereabouts when it moves to audio from Kurt Hansen, the self-proclaimed leader of Dogtown, who is holding a press conference. He claims the crash is an attack on him personally, that he is being framed, and that the whole event is a farce to send forces into Dogtown. I suggest contacting Washington to let them know Myers is alive, but she brushes that option off. She doesn't trust anybody and doesn't know if a friend or foe will pick up the call.

The following day, after no sign of Songbird, Myers brings up plan B: assistance from sleeper agent Solomon Reed, the character performed by Idris

Elba. Myers gives me some instructions and a special coin I can use to prove my legitimacy to Reed and asks me to take an oath to make me an official special agent. Unseen by Myers, Silverhand is looking over our conversation with overt skepticism. I refuse to take the oath, mainly because I don't want Silverhand to think I am a narc. Silverhand commends me for not taking the oath, and I feel cool because Silverhand thinks I'm cool. He teases that he used to be a "corpo jarhead," which I am certain will be explored more in conversation with Silverhand during the expansion.

I enter the open world and track Reed down, but before I do, I call in a vehicle to try out car combat and the new police system.



.../TWISTED.METAL

From the beginning of the demo, Sasko has been eager to show me the changes made to car combat and police. It's one of the elements of Cyberpunk that has been most retooled and will be added alongside the expansion. My Outlaw GTS that I call for is a sleek car with visible guns mounted in the front fender. As I am driving around Dogtown for the first time, I press a key to switch over to the car combat. Two red lasers extend out the front of the vehicle to show my aiming trajectory, and I open fire on some nearby cars, which raises my heat level quickly. Armored vehicles show up, as well as motorcycles and standard police vehicles. Sasko goads me to cause as much chaos as possible before my car catches fire. I get out and run away to watch it explode in the distance and call in the Shion "Samum", which looks like a vehicle Mad Max would drive. It is heavily armored and features front-facing guns like my previous car and rocket launchers that lock on to nearby enemies.

I eventually build up to five stars when an on-screen alert reads, "Triangulating position." I triggered a MaxTac (Maximum Force Tactical Division) response, and when they find me, they hack my vehicle. I no longer have control and must get out and fight on foot. A MaxTac dropship appears, and a collection of four enemies with bladed arms pounce on me at impossible speeds, killing me almost instantly. "You went full Cyberpsycho," Sasko says with a laugh. "We have five

separate archetypes of MaxTac, and the way it works is that every time when they arrive, it basically picks one of the archetypes and throws them against you." Netrunners might hack you, or bladed enemies might speed after you, which is what happened to me. I didn't get a chance to experiment with it, but you can also use new quick hacks against other cars while driving to make vehicles chasing you blow up or stop them in their tracks.

The vehicle combat was a chaotic highlight of my time in the expansion, and it's thankfully an update that every player will get to experience regardless of whether or not they buy the expansion.

.../SEEKING.SOLOMON

After having my car combat fun, it's time to return to the mission, which involves entering a restaurant to find a landline telephone. In a world where phone calls appear in your brain, a landline is a relic of the distant past. V has no idea how to use it. Silverhand appears and mockingly holds his thumb and pinky finger to his ear and mouth to show her how.

Idris Elba's unmistakable voice shows up on the line and hesitantly offers to meet you at the nearby basketball court to make sure you're legitimate. Once at the court, Elba's Solomon Reed appears behind me... or at least I think he does. Reed commands me to look forward while holding a gun against my ribs as he checks the coin I received from Myers. This is not a cutscene, however, and I do have control. I try to turn my head in the middle of his conversation to look at him, and he cuts himself off to say, "Nope, nuh-uh," and turns my head forward. It's a fun moment you could





miss if you passively let the conversation play out.

Reed commands me to meet him at a nearby vehicle in three minutes, and after the tense introduction, I am surprised at how much he softens at the second location. He starts by apologizing for the precautions, seems genuinely worried about Myers, and takes a call from the manager at his bouncer job about getting his shift covered. It all makes Reed an unpredictable but immediately interesting and sympathetic character. It doesn't hurt that he looks and sounds like Idris Elba.

We return to Myers and get in a few shoot-outs along the way. Unlike Silverhand, Reed is helpful in a gunfight and takes out enemies on the way to Myers. He even encourages nearby residents who witnessed the battles to seek safety and shelter. When we finally get to Myers, Reed loses his cool for a moment and seems unsure what to say before stammering a somewhat awkward, "Uh, sorry, Rosalind. Are you all right?"

I chat with Reed and Myers about Songbird's questionable fate before we all agree to move forward. Myers

is trying to stay alive, Reed wants to help Songbird, and I am trying to find a cure for my Silverhand bomb. And that's where the demo ends.

.../A.NEW.START

Cyberpunk is in an odd position that manages to be both enviable and unenviable. The budget and resources are on full display every moment. The game looks better than ever and touts Hollywood talent to perform and sell its story. But nearly everyone had a bad first impression in 2020. Even those



REDUCING THE NOISE

Cyberpunk 2077, by design, is a very noisy world. The way art directors Jakub Knapik and Paweł Mielniczuk use that term is almost chaos. Color is everywhere. Architectural designs are varied and strange. Crowds are large and full of interesting-looking people. But from a simplified video game perspective, it isn't ideal. "It looks great in a single screenshot, but it could be painful or problematic to read depth and to read space when you play the game," Knapik says.

Early in Phantom Liberty's design process, the team carefully and brutally analyzed what worked and what didn't to take those lessons to Dogtown. "We went through every single aspect of grouping colors, grouping shapes, building the depth, layering – solving the noise," Knapik says.

"Characters were not visible in the environment," Mielniczuk says, which sometimes created problems when you are in the middle of a gunfight, for example.

As a result, Dogtown, aided in part by the story allowing for a section of the city to be less reliant on electricity and lights, is generally easier to read. The team wanted it to still be busy but not noisy.

"The geometry comes from details, not colors," Mielniczuk says. I only spent a few hours in Dogtown, but it does feel different and brighter than Night City.

"[Dogtown] doesn't feel alien – it just feels different," Knapik says, and I agree.

who didn't play the game at launch know about its negative reception. It has been fighting an uphill battle with small victories for three years. Phantom Liberty is its biggest opportunity to reset perception, inspire old players to try again, and encourage new players to test the waters. My time with Phantom Liberty and conversations with the team members working hard on its release inspire confidence. I am eager to have an excuse to revisit Cyberpunk 2077. I want to see where Phantom Liberty's story goes, I want to learn more about Solomon Reed, and I want to see how long I can survive against MaxTac when they are throwing everything they have at me. ■

ALL NIGHT WALKING ARE



Building
new realities
within
the mind
of
Alan Wake

BY
**MARCUS
STEWART**

THE “2” in Alan Wake 2 represents its sequel status and, intentionally or otherwise, its two playable protagonists: FBI agent Saga Anderson and the titular star, Alan Wake. We learned more about Saga’s adventure thanks to a lengthy demo at Summer Game Fest. But now, developer Remedy Entertainment has pulled the curtain back on Alan’s side of the story. In a preview session with the studio, I witnessed an entire chapter of the tortured author’s journey within the sinister dream reality known as the Dark Place.

The first game’s story concluded with Alan freeing his wife, Alice, from the Dark Place. Unfortunately, he became trapped there himself, where he remained for 13 years, desperately searching for an escape. The Dark Place serves as a warped reflection of Alan’s mind. Since he resided in New York City, the realm manifests as a twisted version of the Big Apple that incorporates plot elements of his crime novels, also set within the city.

Speaking to creative director Sam Lake, he describes The Dark Place as a “layered dream reality,” with Alan sleeping through these layers during the adventure. To show this dynamic, Remedy turns to its most recurring presentational element: live-action cinematics. The first Alan Wake game famously used these for its in-universe Bright Falls television series, serving more as entertaining yet passive breaks from the tension. Lake says this medium is woven much more tightly into the core experience this time.

While exploring, you encounter screens playing live-action footage that players are prompted to interact with. Doing so transports Alan into the moment itself, giving him a real-world makeover in the process. The game then transitions to a full-screen cinematic with players watching the ensuing strangeness.

The scenario I witnessed showed Alan as a guest on a late-night talk show, “In Between with Mr. Door.” The titular Mr. Door is a jovial host, complete with a Viking-themed in-house band, Old Gods of Asgard (which Alan Wake fans might remember). Wake stands in the green room in a trance-like daze before his name is uttered for his introduction, snapping him to confused attention before anxiously stepping through the curtain. Wake sits as Door excitedly asks about his new book: *Initiation*, the sequel to *Departure*, the novel featured in the previous game. “You left us on quite the cliffhanger,” says Door. “We’ve all been dying to know what ‘It’s not a lake, it’s an ocean’ really means.”

“You and me both,” replies Wake. He has no memory of writing *Initiation*, insisting he hasn’t penned any new novels and that he’d remember doing so. Door jokingly suggests Alan’s evil twin wrote the book before explaining why the interview is so bizarre. Perhaps all of them are trapped within Alan’s story, which overlaps with the real world.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Epic Games DEVELOPER Remedy Entertainment
RELEASE October 27



And in this tale, Alan must escape his nightmare, created by the version of himself crafting the story inside the Writer's Room, by finding the manuscript of a novel he doesn't recall writing, guided by visions of the detective from his stories: Alex Casey.

The chat ends with Mr. Door thanking Alan for one of the strangest interviews of his career. The lights begin flickering, the room darkens, and menacing laughter erupts as the scene fades to black.

"Mr. Door kind of spoils the Dark Place story for us," laughs Lake. "Going on about the setup that Alan Wake, as the player character, is experiencing in the Dark Place, so [it's] meta on that level as well." He then reveals this scene's



conclusion transitions to players standing in an in-game replica of the talk show set, albeit much creepier now, where gameplay begins. All live-action cinematics will seamlessly transition to gameplay in this manner.

The pre-recorded footage consists of a chapter of Alan's story titled "Casey." Wake emerges from the underground into New York City, beckoned by the ringing of a distant pay phone. Upon answering it, a mysterious voice instructs him to go to Caldera Street Station, where he'll contact Alan again. Wake can't help feeling he's heard this conversation before but can't remember, like *déjà vu*. The call cuts out before he can ask any questions, and Wake's on his own.

I take my first good look at my surroundings, soaking in Alan Wake 2's impressive graphical presentation. Powered by Remedy's in-house Northlight Engine, also used to develop Quantum Break and Control, the abandoned, debris-laden streets are densely packed with detail. An eerie red lighting emitted by neon signs blankets some spots, almost as a warning. Of course, the shadows look great, and the welcoming glow of street lights keeps them at bay – sometimes.

This city plaza serves as the primary hub for The Dark Place. As the story progresses, new paths become available for players, so expect to return to this hub regularly. Case in point, Alan reaches the Caldera Street Station sign, but the entrance is somehow missing. He explores a nearby alley, where he runs into Alex Casey, who also appears in Saga's story. As they chat, a menacing presence obscured by shadow draws Casey's attention. He orders Alan to stay put while he investigates, but he's attacked and mortally wounded. All Alan can do is take Casey's gun and proceed alone. He also captures a nearby light source into his new tool: the Dark Place Lamp (DPL).

This vital wand-like device drains charges from powerful light sources, such as a street lamp, and stores them. Saved charges then illuminate dark areas and dispel shadows. I see this in action as Alan is attacked by Taken, enemies corrupted by the Dark Presence. Defeating these shadow figures requires banishing the shadows using the light, exposing the human form underneath, then dropping them with bullets. The DPL can also eliminate darkness barriers, provided the player has enough light charges, as some of these walls require several. Best of all, though, illuminating or darkening areas alters reality within that zone. For example, when Alan returns to Caldera Street Station and inserts a charge into a nearby light post, the missing entrance pops into existence.

After descending into the subway, Alan needs another light charge to go further. He heads back up to the now rainy streets and uses the DPL to shift reality in search of new paths. The effect is instantaneous; one staircase may be barricaded in the dark but open in the light, encouraging players to explore both versions of their surroundings. After more searching, Alan eventually finds a Safe Haven, a well-lit room that allows the player to save and regroup in peace. He then finds the light charge he needs and returns to the subway station.

Another way in which Alan can rewrite the world around him is by finding Plot Elements. These are found within Echo Scenes, mini in-game cinematics that provide flashes of literary inspiration. When Alan makes it to the subway platform, a blocked tunnel halts his trek. However, an Echo of Alex Casey investigating clues left by a murder cult, including a bloody trail at Caldera Station, provides a story thread Alan can now weave into this Scene. Plot Elements appear as cards on the Plot Board, a menu where players select collected Elements to change reality. In this case, applying Casey's thread replaces the blocked path with the aforementioned bloody subway trail for Alan to proceed across. As players collect more Plot Elements, they're encouraged to use them in different Scenes to see what results they wield. While there's only one "correct" combination to move forward, using other Elements may reveal unexpected surprises, good and bad.

Making his way through the maze-like subway tunnels, Alan later encounters another familiar face in Tim Breaker, a cop played by actor Shawn Ashmore. I say "familiar" because Ashmore also portrayed the protagonist in Quantum Break. When I ask if we can expect other cameos from past Remedy titles to appear, the studio coyly responds, "Next question." Breaker knows Alan, but the familiarity isn't mutual. Regardless, Breaker offers supplies and information on a mystery man he's pursuing: Warlin Door.

After some more reality-warping exploration, the demo concludes in a manner that mirrors the end of Saga's demo. Alan encounters Saga in a section of the Dark Place closely connected to reality. The two speak face-to-face as they ask about each other, and Alan desperately tells Saga about his plight.

This chapter took around 40 minutes to finish, but Remedy informs me the demo player stuck to the main path and that players can spend much more time shifting reality to explore different areas. I walked away itching to explore these possibilities myself. The Dark Place seemingly offers a ton of creative exploration, and it's only one-half of the experience. Alan Wake 2 looks promising thus far, and I can't wait to see how the story unfolds this October. ■



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STAR WARS OUTLAWS

Exploring the shadows of the empire

There are a lot of Star Wars video game adaptations. In fact, depending on your age, video games may be your primary way of interacting with the faraway galaxy from a long time ago. Star Wars Outlaws, however, represents something new for the franchise: it's the first time we'll explore an open Star Wars world – though worlds may be more accurate.

"Toshara is a new addition to the Star Wars galaxy, with a biome inspired by the savannahs of Eastern Africa," narrative director Navid Khavari tells us over email. It's one of Outlaws' explorable planets, and it's a hive of scum and villainy, which we've learned Star Wars is lousy with over the years. From a video game perspective, it's the perfect playground for protagonist Kay Vess and her adorable animal partner Nix to pursue their criminal goals.

"Kay's dream is to land a score that will allow her to live life free and find her place in the galaxy," Khavari writes. "This is especially true after a heist goes wrong, and she unexpectedly becomes one of the galaxy's most wanted."

One of the clans Kay must contend with is the Ashiga. They come from the ice planet Kijimi, seen in *Rise of Skywalker*. They are a new Star Wars syndicate that developer Massive Entertainment helped develop in partnership with Lucasfilm Games. Their entire worldview is about the survival of the collective, and everything they do as individuals is judged on its benefit to the larger group. They are precise and dangerous and have overtaken large swaths of the underworld Kay is trying to infiltrate. "Wherever a shadow falls on Kijimi, you will find a member of the Ashiga Clan," Khavari writes.

Not many Star Wars games have explored the scoundrel archetype. We've played as characters like Han Solo in various action games, but Outlaws is looking to really dig deep into that type of character and story. Khavari writes how the goal is to give players access to the fantasy of riding speeders, piloting ships, using a blaster, and exploring cantinas where you need to watch your back.

"There is something truly fantastic about taking on a job from a syndicate, dealing with corrupt Imperials in the capital, and then hopping on your



speeder and blasting across the wide-open savannah," Khavari writes.

From the beginning, the team wanted to place the game's story between *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. "I'm not gonna lie, it's a writer's dream to have that playground," Khavari writes. "For me, it's such a perfect era where the stakes are so unbelievably high from both a character and a galactic perspective." Massive wanted to tell a story about a rookie criminal who has no experience with the galactic war and is trying to make a name for herself during a turbulent time when things are changing in the universe. "Taking that character and placing them in that period felt like a really strong anchor for the rest of the narrative," Khavari writes.

Kay is a character who hasn't formed an opinion about the Empire versus the Rebellion. She is too busy trying to survive to worry about the political machinations of powers beyond her control, and Massive found that avenue into a Star Wars character and story to be exciting.

Kay, arguably, isn't the first video game scoundrel Star Wars character whose story takes place after *Empire Strikes Back*, though. "I loved Shadows of the Empire

growing up, and I'm pretty sure I melted my N64 the amount of times I played it," Khavari writes. "What I can say is that Star Wars Outlaws is an original scoundrel story, and we really want to deliver something that fans and players alike haven't seen or experienced before."

It's unlikely we'll see references to that game or a cameo from Dash Rendar, but that doesn't mean Kay won't cross paths with some familiar characters. Jabba The Hutt, as he is in the films and books taking place around the same time, is a key central underworld figure in Outlaws, and Khavari teases that we shouldn't rule out other potential cameos, but he isn't ready to share additional names.

We haven't been able to get our hands on Outlaws yet, and probably won't for some time, but Khavari and the rest of the team at Massive are clearly passionate about the Star Wars universe and the world(s) within it. "The details matter so much in this galaxy, so we always want to make sure we're capturing the spirit of Star Wars in everything we do," Khavari writes.

We're overdue for a big open world Star Wars game, and we're hopeful Outlaws can live up to expectations. BY KYLE HILLIARD



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft DEVELOPER Massive Entertainment RELEASE 2024



THE CREW MOTORFEST

Competent and familiar

The Crew has been around for nearly a decade, and since its inception, it's struggled to make a cultural dent in the racing genre. I went into a four-hour, hands-on remote preview of The Crew Motorfest hoping to feel something different about this series. But, like The Crew 2 and The Crew before it, Motorfest feels uninspired, even if it's a competent racer.

If you've played a recent Forza Horizon from Xbox's Playground Games, Motorfest will feel similar – perhaps too similar. It takes place on the tropical Oahu island of Hawaii, and the entire locale has been transformed into a festival celebrating car culture. There are flashy racing cinematics, fireworks, giant sculptures, and a barrage of signs telling you the Motorfest is happening. It's bright and pretty but doesn't feel unique. Perhaps Oahu is the shining example of what I see in my head when I picture a tropical island, but if it isn't, then Motorfest paints it as a generalized tropical island. This speaks to my largest issue with Motorfest – it lacks identity beyond a surface level.

Throughout the Motorfest, I engage with various playlists that organize the otherwise open-world activities around Oahu, and each offers a different handful of themed races. Some of these are better than others – I especially like the Vintage Garage, which rethemes the races and game's visuals to feel like the 1960s, with turbo-less cars that lack GPS for use during races. But after an initial dose of each race, they bleed together, even with variance between cars, boats, and planes.

This is especially present in the Made in Japan playlist. While this playlist features the appropriate cars, with modded Mazdas and Hondas taking the spotlight, Motorfest's overall idea of Japanese street racing boils down to characters calling your car a “kaiju,” the same dragon float scattered around each track, and plenty of purple and blue neon. It's shallow, going no further than what's initially presented.

I complete about three races in every playlist and feel the same about each – the theming and attention to history and culture are exciting at first, teasing more to come, only for it to fall short of going any deeper than this first impression.

The racing in each playlist feels fine and competent. The Crew has subtly differentiated itself from other racing franchises by including car-to-boat-to-plane on-the-fly transitions, and it's still good fun in Motorfest. Beyond that, though, it feels like any other

racer, and I already prefer other racing franchises, so Motorfest isn't selling me on The Crew.

I complete my preview by tiptoeing into the Main Stage, a confusing menu of races to finish on a seasonal basis. There are various playlists to engage, like one built around competition and another built around exploring Oahu, and it feels like a solid attempt to keep players engaged with Motorfest beyond credits. But how it works as a live-service seasonal mechanic remains to be seen.

My four hours with Motorfest weren't bad, but they weren't all that thrilling either. At its best, Motorfest seems to be a totally fine racing game. But my first (long) impression is that it's boring and falls flat in a genre constantly expanding with unique ideas on the racing formula from triple-A and independent developers. Motorfest aims to compete with the former, but after this hands-on preview, I'm not sure it has the traction it needs. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 32-Player Online Racing
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Ivory Tower **RELEASE** September 14

ENSHROUDED

Surviving made easier



The survival genre has never entirely worked for me. Life is already stressful enough, and playing a game built on the idea of stress, resource management, and, well, survival has never appealed to me in my off-hours. But Keen Games, the studio behind Portal Knights, let me watch roughly an hour of gameplay of its new survival game Enshrouded, and I came away excited about everything it's doing to alleviate the stresses of the genre.

Keen Games describes Enshrouded as an open-world survival action RPG set in a post-apocalyptic fantasy world drowned by a mysterious fog. You play as a unique person brought back to life by a powerful force called The Flame. From there, you're free to do as you please. Immediately, Enshrouded creative director Antony Christoulakis says that the "survival" part of the game's genre description doesn't mean you instantly die if you don't drink or eat enough food.

That kind of resource management doesn't play into your survival outside of combat because, instead, the effects of food and drink tie back into combat and exploration. Water gives you endurance and stamina

recharge, which allows you to chop wood longer before running out of energy, for example, whereas wolf meat gives you constitution, making you tougher against the elements of the world. There aren't water and food gauges always threatening your character's survival – a welcome reprieve from the typical stress of the genre.

Beyond the survival aspect, Enshrouded looks like what you'd expect out of a fantasy-action RPG. Combat looks fun and manageable, mixing classic melee and magic attacks with a stealth system that lets you hide in tall grass, behind crates, and more. Christoulakis cites From Software's Soulsborne games and Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild as inspiration but says it's "not exactly like any of these." Notably, Keen Games didn't try to make it as challenging as a Soulsborne game, but parries, dodges, stuns, and more are all critical aspects of the action. An entire skill page exists to morph your

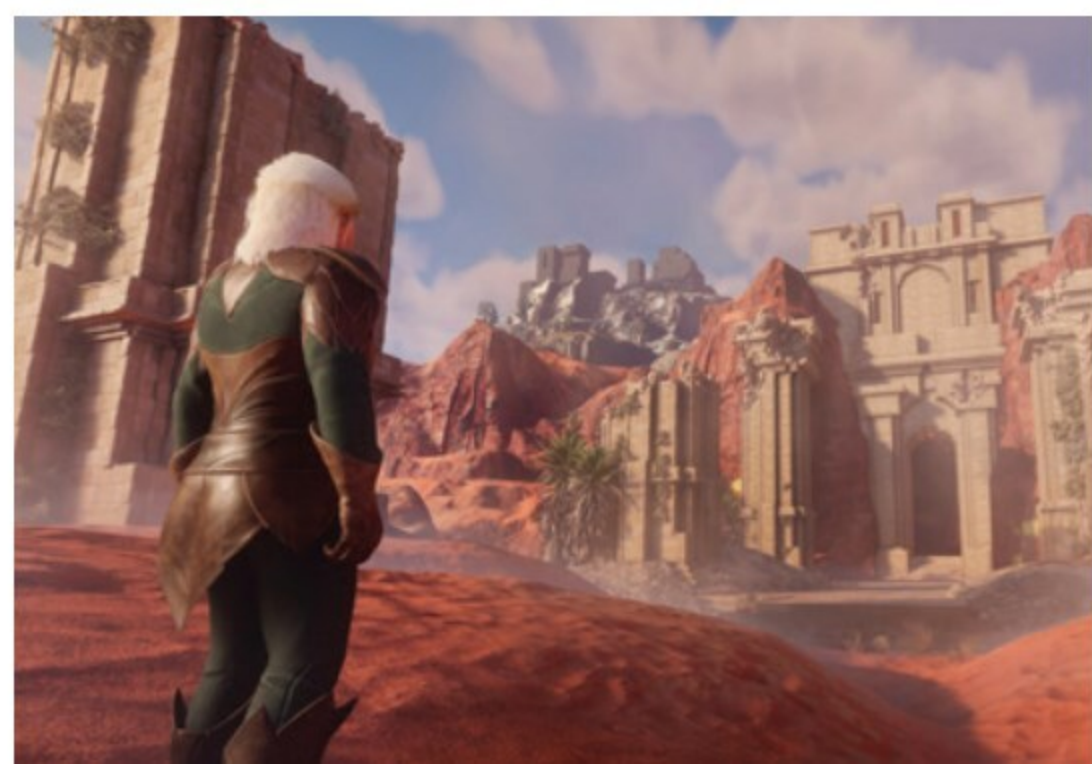
character into a warrior, ranger, mage, and more, but you aren't locked to any one path. And there are skills for abilities and stats outside of combat, too.

"We are not a roleplaying game in the traditional sense," Christoulakis says. "We are not aiming to be the next [Cyberpunk 2077] or Witcher with lots of questlines and cutscenes. It's about interesting lore with lots of discovering and really embracing the freedom to go wherever you like. It's more about the intrinsic motivation of players."

A lot of what you do in Enshrouded is based on exploration – finding dungeons to conquer, traversing through the fog to discover more of the large map, and rebuilding the world using the remains of the past. There's a glider, climbing hook, and fast travel for quick traversal too, but if you go on foot, you won't encounter any loading screens.

Building and crafting look deep but streamlined in an approachable way, with a satisfying voxel-based system powering it. There are many options for building your home, from pre-built staircases that can be added with just a click (if you have the resources needed) to individual bricks or stones. The building reminds me most of Fortnite's easy-to-access but fun-to-master tools.

Enshrouded is a big step away from Keen Games' previous game, Portal Knights, but it's one I'm looking forward to learning more about. While at first glance, it appears pretty standard fantasy action RPG fare, looking deeper reveals some interesting twists on the survival genre, which I typically avoid. That a survival game has me interested in learning more is a significant accomplishment for Enshrouded. It's due out via Steam Early Access sometime this year. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



PLATFORM PC STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (16-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Keen Games GmbH DEVELOPER Keen Games GmbH RELEASE 2023 (Early Access)

LORDS OF THE FALLEN

An exciting transformation

The first Lords of the Fallen was released in 2014, a time when From Software had so far only released three Souls games, Bloodborne wasn't out, and Elden Ring hadn't yet redefined what the action RPG genre could be. I recall it being one of the first Soulslikes to appear on my radar. It didn't hit for me, and I put it down after a few hours. It was slow, clunky, and allowed for little wiggle room in gameplay style.

I yearned for the flexibility of Dark Souls' various classes and the speed some of them allowed. Fast forward nearly a decade, and CI Games is taking another crack at Lords of the Fallen with, well, Lords of the Fallen, and it's doing everything right so far. Despite a rocky development with multiple studios and production restarts, it's one of the most exciting Soulslike games I've played in years.

Not only does it boast a good assortment of classes, allowing for various playstyles of different speeds across melee and ranged combat, but it features two distinct realms. This is to say Lords of the Fallen has fixed both my biggest problem with its predecessor while also adding its own spin to the Soulslike sub-genre, an increasingly important factor as the genre continues to grow more crowded. I start my journey with the Blackfeather Ranger, which prioritizes versatility over a single-focus approach and is also the Bloodborne-esque hunter seen in various trailers. Unsurprisingly, this ranger is fast and agile, using a sleek ax and small shield.

Overall, Lords of the Fallen's combat is fast and versatile, its parry timing generous – as are the effects of blocking – and the world is full of surprises and secrets. Both the “surprise enemy jumps out to scare you” and “Ooh a treasure chest” variety.

What sets Lords of the Fallen apart from the rest of the genre, and what excites me most for the full release, is its two-world system. Axiom is the world of the living, which creative director Cezar Virtosu tells me is completely connected through shortcuts, hidden paths, and more. It's metal as hell, full of dark catacombs and terrifying gothic cathedrals oozing atmosphere. But it's sometimes also bright, revealing a beautiful landscape dotted with castle peaks and mausoleum spires I hope to arrive at later in my journey. Simply put, it's the world you expect of a game like this.

Umbral, however, is the realm of the dead that exists parallel to Axiom. It can be accessed at almost any time, in real-time.

But, once there, you must fight through its more challenging enemies to reach an access point bringing you back to Axiom. While you can choose to explore it on your own, Lords of the Fallen brings you to Umbral almost every time you die. Dying gives you a second chance in Umbral, where, if you survive, you can reach the realm of Axiom once more. This eases the usual challenges of the genre – mind you, Lords of the Fallen is still extremely tough – but also opens a unique playground for puzzles.

Using the Umbral Lamp, I illuminate Umbral while in Axiom. That gate blocking my way to a chest in Axiom doesn't exist in Umbral. I discover this with a quick lamp illumination and easily walk through a hole where, back in Axiom, the gate exists. This lamp also interacts with the environment to break down barriers, pull platforms toward you, and more. This doesn't turn the experience into a puzzle game, but it's a welcome element of locomotion and traversal that makes Lords of the Fallen's exploration exciting and varied.

I also use this lamp in combat to pull the souls out of enemies. Once revealed, any damage I do to that soul is exponentially multiplied when it crashes back into the enemy's body, making quick work of smaller enemies and taking out handy chunks of health from bosses. It's a limited-use system, though, which prevents this mechanic from being too powerful.

The Umbral Lamp and its associated Umbral realm are the foundation of Lords of the Fallen, and I like how it reshapes everything I do. It is the highlight of my hands-on time, just above a great boss fight against a bloody and





fast-paced flying knight that sent my soul to Umbral more than a few times.

I'm impressed with how great Lords of the Fallen feels to play and how unique its world and systems are. Hexworks is taking big strides to make it stand out not just from its 2014 predecessor, but also the rest of the genre, and I commend the efforts. While two hours of play isn't enough to call it a success, I'm hopeful the final package will coalesce into a new Soulslike favorite. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER CI Games **DEVELOPER** Hexworks
RELEASE October 13



EA SPORTS FC 24

Same star, new kit

During a July livestream, EA Sports revealed EA Sports FC 24, the replacement for its overwhelmingly popular FIFA franchise. The move away from the FIFA license was announced last year, but many of the core tenets remain the same.

The big pitch is around its advanced technology. EA's proprietary Frostbite engine returns, but with enhancements, including the new Sapien character model skeletons first introduced through Madden NFL 24. The skeleton ensures players look truer to life when standing still but also in motion, making for more realistic movement that affects both the game's visuals and gameplay. This year's implementation of Frostbite also includes new GPU cloth technology, which ensures players' kits move like real-world materials in reaction to movement. You can also expect a better matchday experience, with new animations and scenes featuring the action happening around the pitch, not just on it.

The big new technology is HyperMotionV, which purports to translate the rhythm and fluidity of real-world soccer into EA Sports FC 24. Using this technology, a real-world player can pull off a new move that isn't in the game, then, within days, HyperMotionV can leverage volumetric capture to build precise animations around that new move and have it in the game faster than ever. It sounds impressive, so it makes sense when EA Sports says the HyperMotionV technology is only present in the PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC versions.

Finally, a new system known as PlayStyles is included. Using Opta optimization, PlayStyles goes beyond the series' in-game ratings to bring athletes to life in new ways. Each PlayStyle gives stars and other players unique abilities for creating a more authentic experience.

We learned the list of leagues is expanding with new inclusions like Liga F and Frauen-Bundesliga, which will join existing leagues

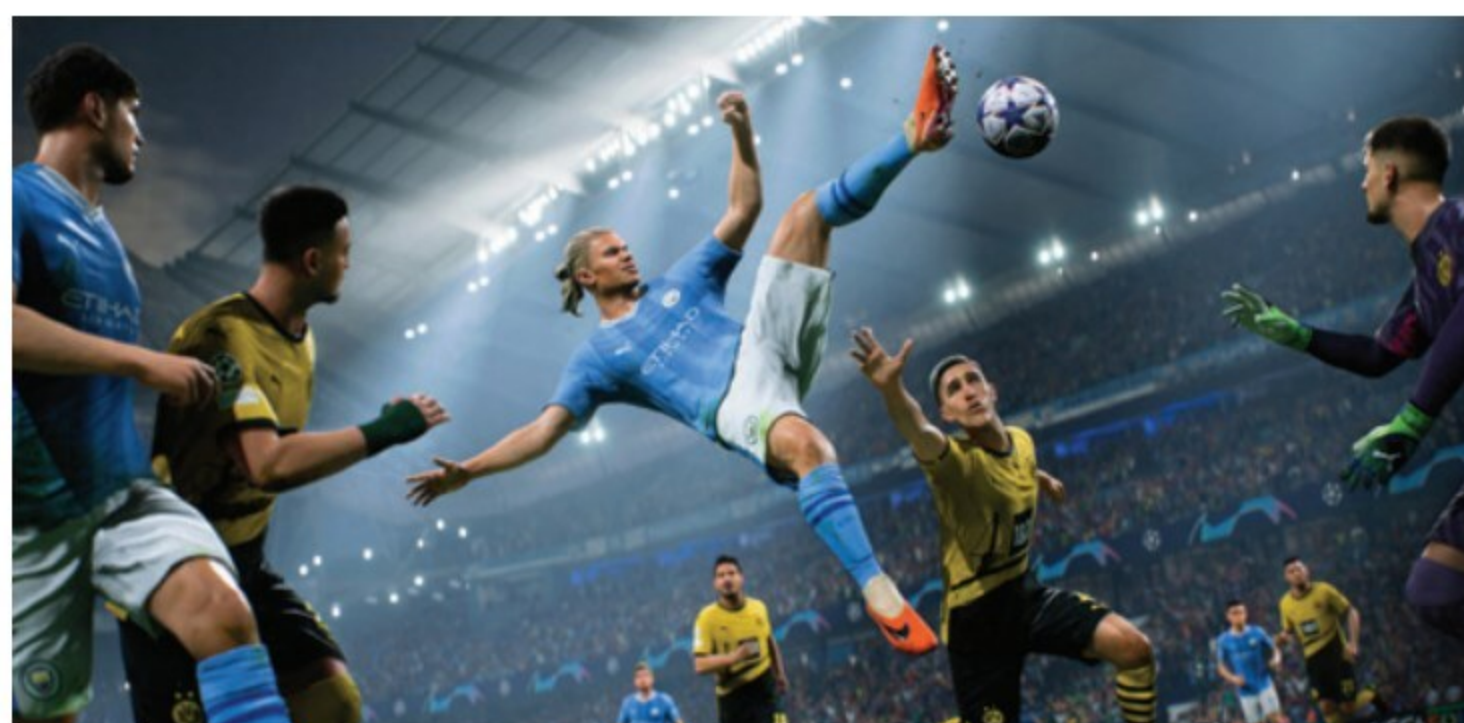
like LaLiga, Bundesliga, Serie A, and Conmebol Libertadores. The company also announced an exclusive renewal with UEFA, making FC 24 the only place you can play UEFA Champions League, UEFA Women's Champions League, UEFA Europa League, UEFA Europa Conference League, and UEFA Super Cup. Finally, we learned the FC series secured a long-term renewal with the Premier League.

FC players received good news in the form of cross-platform play. The current-gen versions (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC) play cross-platform, while the last-gen versions (PS4 and Xbox One) can play with each other. Unfortunately, Switch players will be stuck on their own island, as that system is excluded from cross-platform play. Cross-platform features expand into Clubs, Co-op Season, Volta Football, and Ultimate Team Co-op in addition to the pre-existing cross-platform features found in Ultimate Team, Online Friendlies, and Online Seasons.

EA Sports also revealed Manchester City star Erling Haaland as its cover athlete for this year's entry. If you can't wait to step onto the pitch and show what you've got, those who buy the Ultimate Edition will receive early access starting September 22.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) PUBLISHER EA Sports
DEVELOPER EA Canada, EA Romania RELEASE September 29



PALIA

Building a new life



Life sims can be great stress relievers, letting you build a digital existence from the ground up at a leisurely pace. However, more purpose-driven players may struggle with having to essentially make their own fun. Palia aims to satisfy both crowds by tossing dozens of players into a fleshed-out fantasy world to build a life while also embarking on an epic quest.

As a custom-created avatar, players are, quite literally, dropped into the world of Palia. Not only have you suddenly crashed into this world, but many other players have, too; Palia is a free-to-play MMO-style game.

Palia borrows a few notes from the recent Zelda games by letting players climb most surfaces (complete with stamina meter) and, eventually, gain a glider. They begin with decorative elements for an otherwise wild plot of land where they build a home and farm.

Chopping wood, mining rocks, and other forms of harvesting gets the job done, and others can assist in your endeavors or simply gift you the necessary materials, should they choose. Activities raise your proficiency in certain skills while unlocking better equipment.

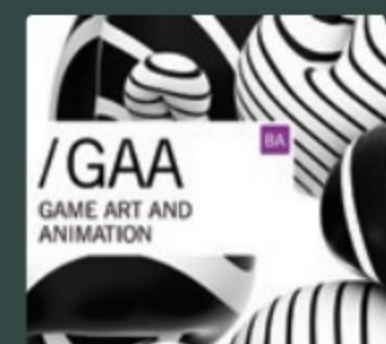
Venturing into town lets you meet the locals, who all have individual jobs and schedules. Chatting with them or solving their problems raises your friendship level. You can even become romantically involved with your neighbors. The main quest whisks you to ancient ruins that task players with puzzle-solving and other challenges to unravel a broader mystery. After enjoying what I played, I'm interested in getting to the bottom of Palia's story. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** MMO/Simulation
PUBLISHER Singularity 6
DEVELOPER Singularity 6 **RELEASE** 2023

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MORTAL KOMBAT 1

Another bloody chapter

This summer's announcement of Mortal Kombat 1 brought with it a new era for the long-running fighting franchise. The latest game from Nether-Realm Studios brings the outstanding fighting mechanics the series has been known for since the 2011 reboot but adds layers of complexity. The most notable addition to the core mechanics in this entry is perhaps the Kameo feature, where you can bring in a secondary character to perform a quick move at a crucial time in a fight. But as I learned during my final time seeing the game before launch, during which I played the first chapter of the story and experienced the new robust single-player Invasions mode, that first look earlier this summer only scratched the surface.

As Mortal Kombat 1's story mode begins, we see a familiar face speaking to a crowd of people in a small village. An elderly Shang Tsung, looking like he did in the original Mortal Kombat, gives his pitch on a tonic he is holding. He claims it's a miracle in a bottle that can cure any illness; it sounds too good to be true, and it turns out it is, as a large man who purchased a bottle for his ailing daughter interrupts him to say it's nothing more than tea. The crowd surrounds the devious salesman and the camera cuts.

We then see Shang Tsung later that night, battered and bruised. He removes the old man costume

to reveal his true, younger form; clearly, this version of Shang Tsung doesn't have his trademark shapeshifting powers. However, a woman approaches in the night, claiming that she can help him get the power he pretends to have. She informs him of the sorcery he has wielded in other realities and offers to join forces so they can put the realms at his feet. An evil smile flashes across Shang Tsung's face, and the scene cuts yet again.

Chapter 1: The New Era focuses on Kung Lao. In this reality, Kung Lao is a farmer alongside Raiden, who is no longer the god of thunder. The two are harvesting crops, but Kung Lao yearns for more. During dinner that night, the Lin Kuei arrive and begin causing trouble at Madam Bo's eating establishment. First, Kung Lao confronts Smoke, but the fights expand to include encounters with Scorpion (who seems to be a

member of his usual rival group) and Sub-Zero. My favorite small detail is how the Kameo mechanic works within the story. In this instance, Raiden was there during the scene, so naturally, he is inserted as Kung Lao's Kameo fighter.

The trademark Mortal Kombat campy humor remains, even as the scenes become more action-packed. In one sequence, Sub-Zero attacks, leaving a block of ice on the bar, only for a man at the bar to break a piece off and put it in his drink. The visual fidelity of these scenes is impressive. The facial and motion capture is incredible, and the high-resolution textures and voice performances kept me completely immersed. My final battle before my time with story mode concluded was against Sub-Zero before it was time to move on to something else.

The story modes of Mortal Kombat are traditionally great, but Mortal Kombat 1 isn't relying

solely on that for its single-player. Invasions is an RPG-inspired mode that lets you unlock rewards like cosmetics, skins, and gear by participating in bite-sized challenges. The challenges often revolve around defeating enemies in fights, but often with different modifiers, such as super armor, telegraphed moves to help you time your attacks, and obstacles like fire-breathing demons. Meanwhile, other nodes on the hub world include things like survival minigames where you dodge energy balls or even Test Your Might challenges.

“It scratches a few itches,” director and series co-creator Ed Boon says. “There’s additional lore and story. There’s a little bit of training and getting accustomed to the game. There’s clearly secrets that we’re burying in there, and it’s also a mechanism for getting rewards. That’s always been part of the function of Konquest mode or The Krypt or something like that: some mechanism that the player can, within the Mortal Kombat universe, get cool stuff.”

The rewards you earn in Invasions are also geared towards which character you play as, allowing you to earn items mostly related to characters you like fighting with. As you progress, fighters level up to earn better stats, and you can also earn Talismans, which can be used to augment a character. For example, you can give Sub-Zero the ability to throw flaming skulls. Using the in-game Forge, you can modify and augment Talismans to perform different tasks ranging from adding new abilities to healing. However, you need to use them judiciously, as they have limited charges before refilling them at the Forge in between matches. Those seem particularly important with another convention



borrowed from RPGs: character types and custom loadouts that let you create builds of fighters designed to have the edge over certain challenges.

The Invasions content operates on a six-week seasonal structure, each containing unique challenges and rewards. Not only that, but your progression also resets with each season, meaning all your Talismans, currency, and character progression is back to square one every six weeks. The team hopes this provides additional content for those who get really into the mode, which NetherRealm tells me carries with it approximately nine hours of content each season.

I always eagerly anticipate the single-player content of each new Mortal Kombat game, but even within the elite franchise, Mortal Kombat 1’s offerings feel special. Whether you’re looking forward to the exciting narrative, the ever-unfolding content of Invasions, or simply throwing down with friends and strangers, Mortal Kombat 1 is poised to continue the very strong year we’ve been seeing for the fighting game genre. **BY BRIAN SHEA**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER NetherRealm Studios **RELEASE** September 19

PERSONA 3 RELOAD

A new self emerges from the shadows



PREVIEWS

After years of fan requests and rumors, we're finally getting a modern-day remake of perhaps the most pivotal entry in one of the most popular current JRPG franchises. Persona 3 altered the course of the Shin Megami Tensei spin-off series when it launched in 2007. While mechanics introduced in Persona 3, like social links, have gone on to define subsequent entries, the technology and quality-of-life improvements of games like Persona 4 Golden and Persona 5 Royal make it challenging to go back to the original Persona 3 or even the improved Persona 3 Portable Sega recently ported to modern platforms. However, that all changes with Persona 3 Reload.

Persona 3 Reload is a largely faithful remake of the seminal title, built from the ground up using Unreal Engine. This new version includes much-improved graphics, various quality-of-life improvements, control options, an expansion and redesign of Tartarus, and a new soundtrack comprised of rearranged, re-recorded, and all-new tracks. As someone who played and loved Persona 4 and 5, this remake feels like a dream come true.

My hands-on demo begins within the ever-shifting walls of Tartarus during the game's early hours. As Mitsuru Kirijo guides the party comprised of Makoto, Yukari, and Junpei, I get a feel for how combat plays out in Persona 3 Reload. I've played through the lengthy Persona 5 campaign twice (once in vanilla and once in Royal), and the combat and presentation feel incredibly familiar to that lauded,

most-recent entry. Since many consider Persona 5 one of the best modern-day JRPGs, that's the highest compliment I can pay this remake. And yes, this time, you directly control the entire party, though the option exists to switch your party members to auto-execute a strategy like in the original if you prefer.

My second gameplay session involves the remake's first boss battle, The Arcana Priestess. The action occurs on a mono-rail speeding towards another train, so you're on the clock to take her down. While the countdown starts at 30 minutes, she speeds up the train as the battle progresses, causing the timer to

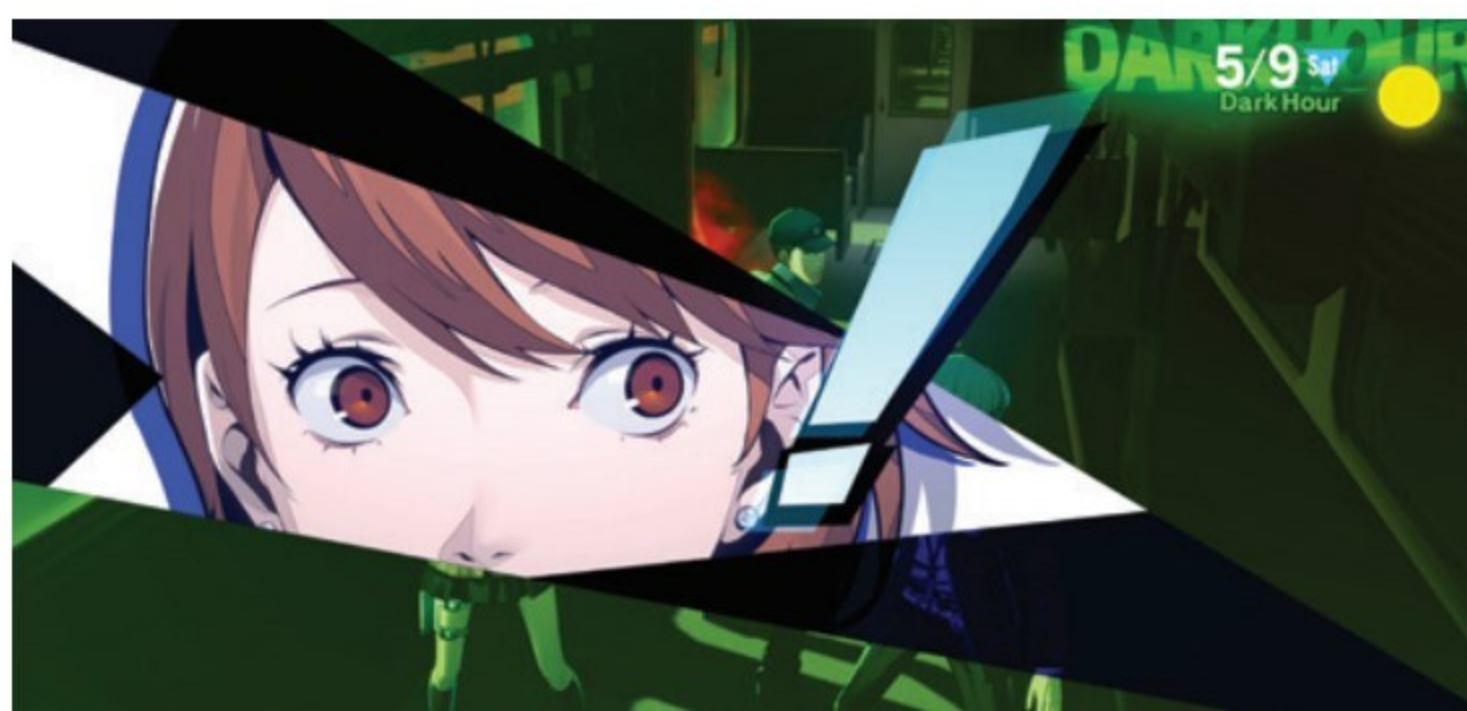
drop even faster. Along the way, she attacks my party with powerful spells and summons minions with different vulnerabilities, but she's no match for my squad, and we stop the train in time. The clock mechanic works incredibly well within the constructs of a turn-based combat system, as it adds stress to the otherwise thoughtful process that can be selecting your next moves.

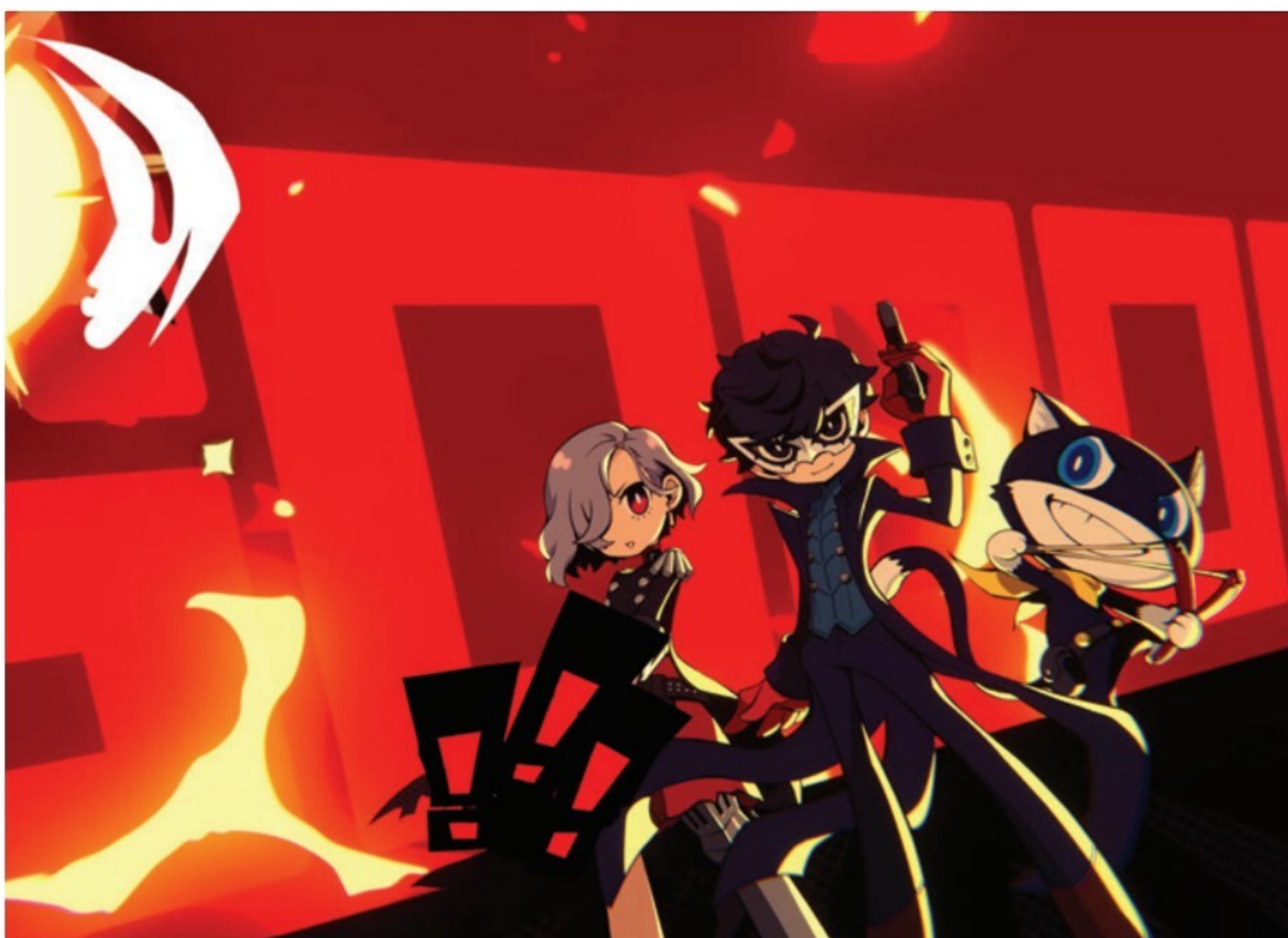
With quality-of-life improvements seemingly permeating every aspect of the game, going forward, I'm most excited to see how the social links benefit from the development team getting a new crack at them more than 15 years later. After defeating the boss at the tail end of my session, my team's link leveled up, but I know that won't be the only way to improve my standing with them. I can't wait to see how P-Studio brings the social simulation elements of Persona 3 into the modern gaming age.

Though fans may have been disappointed with the less-modernized release of Persona 3 Portable on current consoles earlier this year, Persona 3 Reload looks to rectify the shortcomings of that remaster and truly bring one of the most influential RPGs of the last 20 years into the modern era. If it all goes well, those looking to get into the Persona series for the first time might have a new answer for the best entry point. Whether you're a first-time player or a seasoned veteran of the series, we won't have long to wait, as Reload arrives this February.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega DEVELOPER P-Studio RELEASE February 2





PERSONA 5 TACTICA

The spin-off we never saw coming

Persona 5 has quickly become its own subseries as Sega and Atlus churn out updates and spin-off entries to their beloved 2017 turn-based RPG. Following 2018's rhythm-based *Dancing in Starlight*, 2020's *Persona 5 Royal*, and 2021's *Persona 5 Strikers*, this year brings the Phantom Thieves of Hearts to another new genre: turn-based strategy.

Persona 5 Tactica invites players on another adventure with Joker, Morgana, Ryuji, Ann, and the rest of the cast from the original game (no sign of Kasumi from *Royal* or Sophia and Zenkichi from *Strikers*). This time, the game starts with two shadowy figures discussing the latest news story that's swept Japan: the disappearance of the front-runner to become the country's next prime minister. Shortly after, we join our heroes at their home base in Leblanc. Hearing them talking about going their separate ways following Makoto's upcoming graduation and having the same conversations we've all had with friends where we, often in vain, promise to keep in touch and visit each other is somewhat heartbreaking and emotional.

However, as the television news recaps the political crisis unfolding, the coffee shop shakes, the power goes out, and a bright light emanates from the front door. After stepping outside, the team realizes they're in their Phantom Thieves outfits and certainly not in Tokyo anymore. Instead, they're in some kind of Medieval European-style world, with old-time soldiers to confront them.

The core gameplay mechanics pull from the tactical mainstays of the last several decades and the *Persona 5* series. Cover is essential, as it blocks attacks from the front and resists ranged damage from the sides and back. Your party members move freely, but their placement relies on the standard grid-based system. If you attack a defenseless enemy, they are downed, which stuns them and grants the damage-dealing character a precious extra turn.

Each character has ranged and melee attacks, but it wouldn't be

Persona without, well, the *Persos*. Joker's Arsène deals area-of-effect damage that can devastate huddled enemies, while Morgana's Zoro wind skill knocks enemies out of cover. If you plan carefully, you can even knock enemies into each other for extra damage.

Once you down an opponent, you can position your three party members surrounding the downed enemy to perform a Triple Threat attack. This new take on the All-Out Attack mechanic deals a devastating blow to the downed character and any enemy caught within the triangle formed by the three party members. This mechanic had me thinking about my positioning even more so than other tactics games.

As I progress through the story, I meet Marie, a giant pink lady who seems to have mind-controlled the soldiers within this world. After capturing Ryuji, she does the same to him, which results in a battle against him with a group of soldiers. Since his Captain Kidd *Persona* can deal heavy lightning damage and my objective is to defeat all enemies aside from Ryuji, I need to take out the soldiers as efficiently as possible while keeping my distance from the mind-controlled friend. I hope more distinct scenarios like this await me in the final game.

Though the *Persona 5* spin-offs keep pushing further from the RPG formula fans are most familiar with, I still can't help but smile at the prospects of another fun adventure with this amazing cast of characters I first fell in love with in 2017. *Persona 5 Tactica* probably won't be for all fans of *Persona 5*, but those who enjoy tactics-based gameplay and the dynamic cast of the original RPG may find a match made in heaven. **BY BRIAN SHEA**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Strategy PUBLISHER Sega
DEVELOPER P-Studio RELEASE November 17



LIKE A DRAGON GAIDEN: THE MAN WHO ERASED HIS NAME

Crime family reunion

Following *Yakuza 6: Song of Life* in 2018, players bid farewell to Kazuma Kiryu as the series protagonist. In 2020, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* positioned the charismatic Ichiban Kasuga as the franchise's new face and flipped the series' gameplay conventions on its head, signaling a new era for the series (even though Kiryu still played a big part in that game). In the West, Sega even officially rebranded the franchise from *Yakuza* to *Like a Dragon* in 2022, to have the name more closely fit its original Japanese title. However, Kiryu didn't step out of the spotlight for long, as he returns to lead the newest spin-off, *Like a Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name*.

Kiryu, now going by Joryu, has escaped the hustle and bustle of Kamurocho, Tokyo, in favor of Osaka and Yokohama. He may have left parts of his dark past dealing with organized crime behind him, but if my hands-on demo is any indication, the kind-hearted former yakuza is falling back into his old habits.

My gameplay session takes place at The Castle, a giant cargo ship in international waters off the coast of Japan. The Castle is a neon-drenched playground for the yakuza where anything goes, and law enforcement cannot stop them. This adult-themed park is based on the famous Osaka Castle (which coincidentally played a big part in *Yakuza 2*), hence the name.

Joryu arrives at The Castle via helicopter alongside a knowledgeable woman. After she informs Joryu all about the activities he can participate in, she runs off to the main attraction: the Coliseum.

Unfortunately, in leaving Joryu behind, she left him in unfriendly territory with no one to vouch

for him. A group of yakuza take note and immediately inform him they don't just let anyone in. If you're familiar with the series, you know what's coming next.

The criminals gang up on Joryu, and I test his combat prowess. *Like a Dragon Gaiden* retains the series' original action-based brawler combat. You have two fighting styles at your disposal: *Yakuza*, an aggressive style that harkens back to our hero's younger days, and *Agent*, a new speed-based style that lets him deploy gadgets to take down foes. I opt to experiment with the *Agent* style. I use gadgets by holding down each of the four face buttons. Spider lets Joryu throw a wire to tie up and throw enemies, Hornet summons A.I. combat drones, Serpent activates Joryu's jet shoes to charge opponents, and Firefly is a cigarette-shaped bomb that feels straight out of a secret-agent movie.

This style is helpful in the Coliseum, where Joryu can compete in fights to win money.

However, if you feel like letting someone else get blood on their hands, you have a roster of fighters from prior games. From Patriarch Gondawara from *Yakuza 2* to series muscleman Gary "Buster" Holmes, you can send various combatants out to do your dirty work. I, of course, choose to play as fan favorite Goro Majima, who focuses on speedy attacks. You can also participate in chaotic team-based fights where dozens of characters brawl it out.

Outside the Coliseum, The Castle offers fun diversions, including card-based minigames like *Oicho-Kabu*, *Koi-Koi*, *Poker*, and *Blackjack*. You can customize your outfit at the Boutique or unwind at the Cabaret. Here, you go on live-action first-person dates that bring a level of uncomfortable immersion since you're on a date and selecting dialogue options while staring at close-up FMVs of real women on your monitor. It could be the kind of thing that requires some explaining if someone walks in while you're playing one of those scenes. Unfortunately, I didn't get to explore outside of The Castle, nor did I see any of the series' trademark zany sub-missions, but the tone of *Like a Dragon Gaiden* is on point for what fans have come to expect from the series.

While most are excited about the return of Kiryu as the protagonist, the many hearts that were won over by the lovable Ichiban Kasuga in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* needn't worry; the next mainline title, *Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth*, brings us another adventure featuring Ichiban next year. In the meantime, *Like a Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name* feels like an excellent return to the series' roots starring the hero most people associate with the long-running franchise.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega DEVELOPER Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio RELEASE November 8



JUSANT

A majestic climb

From Life Is Strange to Vampyr to Harmony: The Fall of Reverie, Don't Nod has established itself as a studio willing to try new ideas. Its meditative mountain climbing game, Jusant, is unlike any of its more recent work, and after scaling beautiful terrain for over two hours, it may also be the studio's most impressive title yet.

Jusant presents players with a simple goal: climb to the top of a massive tower. That means scaling

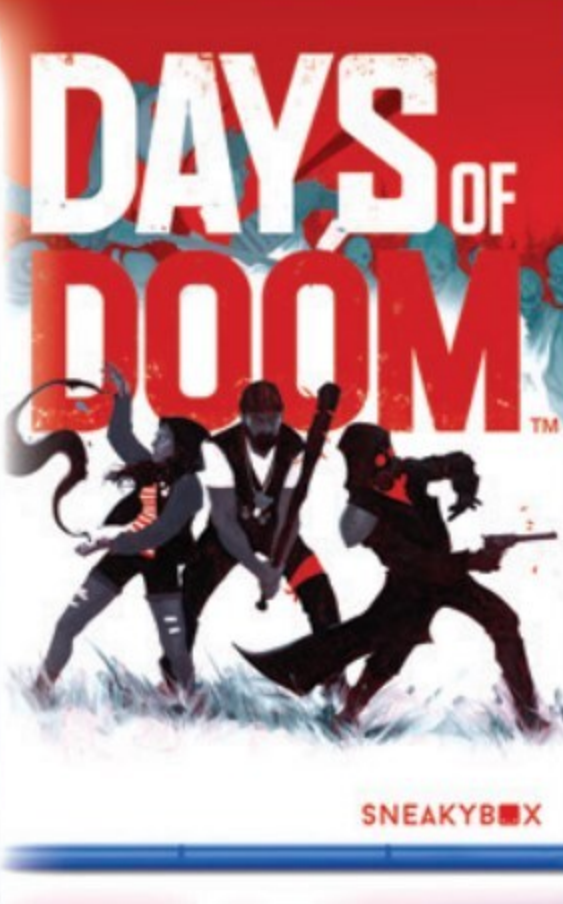
a variety of mountainous cliffs while exploring the remnants of a lost civilization embedded into the walls itself. Players control a young man joined by a cute aquatic critter named Ballast possessing strange magical abilities.

The left/right triggers control the protagonists' respective arms, which you guide to aim and take hold of grip points. A stamina meter governs how long you can hold on, but pressing the left stick provides a breather to replenish this bar. Climbing feels great and strikes a balance between feeling intuitive and challenging in a realistic manner without becoming mechanically cumbersome or tiring. Anchoring yourself with a rope keeps you safe, and you can drive up to three stakes into walls to add additional anchor points to extend your rope's distance to reach far-off perches. I enjoy strategically managing my rope and stakes across puzzle-like climbing

challenges, and overcoming tricky obstacles is satisfying.

Ballast lends a hand by emitting a mystical bellow that makes large flowers sprout a patch of grabbable buds or grow snaking vines that you can hitch a ride to. This ability also activates various enigmatic artifacts scattered across abandoned villages. These settlements, along with various hidden pathways hiding letters and other treasures, lend to the game's appealing air of mystery. A smooth, flat pastel presentation makes it a colorful treat for the eyes to boot. Between the fun climbing, ever-changing environmental challenges, and intriguing lore, Jusant has a mountain of potential, and I can't wait to see the summit. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Don't Nod DEVELOPER Don't Nod
RELEASE October 31



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GUNBRELLA



The game with the impressively descriptive portmanteau (you carry an umbrella that is also a gun) has appeared in this magazine multiple times and for good reason. Our most recent hands-on gave us the most time yet and offered a glimpse at the surprisingly dark story and a challenging boss fight. We can't wait to play the rest of the game later this year. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Doinksoft **RELEASE** 2023

NICKELODEON ALL-STAR BRAWL 2

The Nicktoons are throwing down for a second round. While its predecessor didn't set the world on fire, the sequel boasts a larger roster out of the gate, features a new story campaign, and combatants can now unleash powerful Super abilities. New faces include Squidward and Jimmy Neutron, who are, thankfully, voiced from the get-go this time. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Fighting **PUBLISHER** GameMill Entertainment
DEVELOPER Ludosity, Fair Play Labs **RELEASE** 2023



9 YEARS OF SHADOWS

9 Years of Shadows already enjoyed a well-received release on PC, but it will be making its way to Switch soon. Heavily inspired by Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, the game follows Europa as she gains new abilities and explores a labyrinthian castle with her sentient teddy bear, Apino. The game felt great on PC, and we're looking forward to playing again on Switch. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Freedom Games **DEVELOPER** Halberd Studios **RELEASE** 2023





CITIZEN SLEEPER 2: STARWARD VECTOR

The sequel to the 2022 sci-fi sleeper hit once again puts you in the body of a decaying android with one task: survive. However, you now command your own ship and crew, and it's up to you to keep them out of trouble. Dice rolls still determine the success of decision-making, and a ticking clock maintains a perpetual sense of urgency. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Fellow Traveler **DEVELOPER** Jump Over The Age **RELEASE** TBA

EVERYWHERE



From long-time Grand Theft Auto producer Leslie Benzies, Everywhere is an open-world, sci-fi driving and shooting action game that also puts creation tools in the hands of players to shape its world, Arcadia. We're admittedly skeptical of the 2023 release window but are excited to see what a former Rockstar developer will do with a completely original video game and world. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Build a Rocket Boy
DEVELOPER Build a Rocket Boy **RELEASE** 2023

AIKODE

Aikode's release is not around the corner, but its impressive landscapes and acrobatic combat are already attention-grabbing. Early footage shows a balletic character fighting gigantic creatures in a collapsing city, moving through colorful fields of flowers, and driving a motorcycle. Fans of Nier: Automata should take notice as the games share similar aesthetics. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** ACE
DEVELOPER ACE **RELEASE** 2025

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SEA OF STARS

Genre excellence

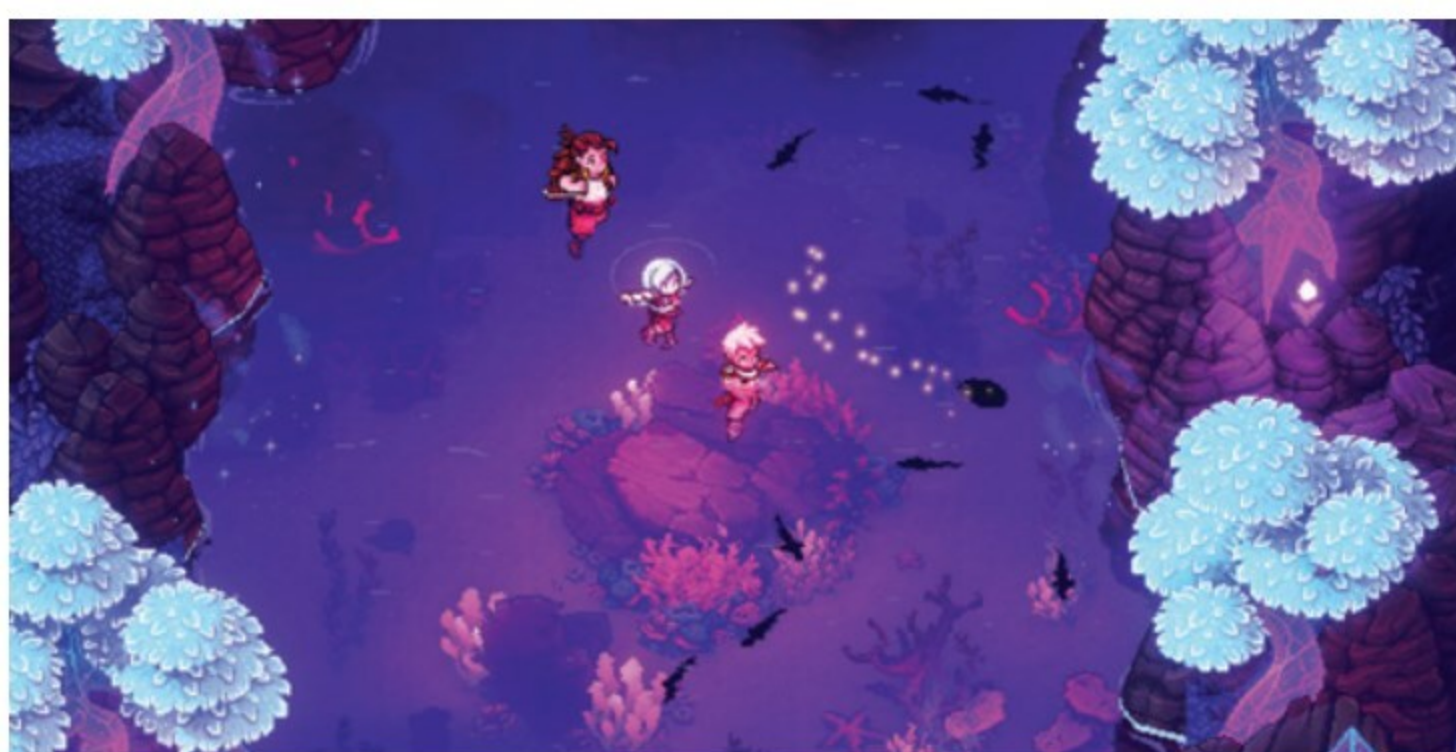
Sea of Stars is like a great genre film by a skilled director. It looks and feels familiar; you basically know what to expect and can probably even predict the major beats, but it doesn't hinder the experience. The intention is so well-executed that I was eager to soak it all in and, in this case, swim in the stars. I dreaded Sea of Stars' conclusion not because I feared the worst but because I didn't want to leave the world and stop playing.

Overtly inspired by 16-bit RPG greats like Super Mario RPG and primarily Chrono Trigger, Sea of Stars is a journey about a group of friends that grows in size and experience throughout an approximately 25-hour adventure. The story centers on two Solstice Warriors, children delivered by a magical eagle instead of traditional childbirth, who can control the power of the moon and the sun. What begins as an adventure about defeating a monster doesn't take long to turn into something bigger than everyone involved in ways that impressively feel both small and personal and epic when necessary.

Ultimately, Sea of Stars is a story about the burden of responsibility (and gods, and magic, and robots, and friendship), and it does a good job of showing all sides of the story. The villains are villains, and the heroes are heroes, but I understand where everyone is coming from. I appreciate this approach to its story and characters and admire it for feeling familiar within the genre but also playing with larger ideas about the ideology of immortals or toying with fun concepts like shared consciousness in a single robot. I eagerly pursued all the optional threads and listened to every extracurricular story from Teaks, our traveling historian, which is a compliment to the game's world-building.

Beyond the story, which is engaging, exists a fantastic turn-based RPG. Every encounter in Sea of Stars, from the random enemies you run into while solving puzzles to the final confrontation, feels fully considered and designed. The combat encourages you to lean on special abilities and combos so you're not just doing the same basic attack on every enemy. The combat also has timed button-press bonuses, which is the key to my RPG heart. Getting an extra few hits or taking less damage from an attack with a timed press is always a joy, and it feels particularly rewarding in Sea of Stars.

With the emphasis on special character-specific abilities, scenarios feel like puzzles but do so without leaning too much on the same solutions. It also goes out of its way not to punish you for experimenting and using everyone in your party. Sea of Stars is a game where new members join your party late in the journey, but I used and understood the fashionably tardy as much as, if not more, than the core party. It makes everyone feel essential, which is not how I typically feel about RPG party members.



The audio and visuals also deserve highlighting. The music expertly recalls the 16-bit era; plenty of its tracks and musical cues are still looping in my head. The soundtrack does a great job of establishing specific themes early on and then playing with them in new ways later in the story. The pixel art is fantastic, with every environment brimming with detail and color. Huge-scale characters and bosses are awe-inspiring, and lighting effects (that would have been impossible on a 16-bit console) make everything feel alive. Changing the time of day, a frequent effect leveraged for

solving puzzles, looks particularly impressive, and I never tired of seeing it.

Sea of Stars is a stellar throwback that appeals to fans like me who love 16-bit RPGs, but it also functions as an excellent entry point. Annoyances that hindered early games that inspired Sea of Stars are nowhere to be seen. Simple actions like moving around the world feel great, the story picks up quickly, and farming experience is effectively unnecessary. It all leads to a smooth, consistently thrilling adventure with fun combat, all in a gorgeous and inviting world. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sabotage Studio **DEVELOPER** Sabotage Studio
RELEASE August 29 **RATING** E10+



BLASPHEMOUS 2

Absolution

Steeped in religious themes, the narrative of Blasphemous 2 tells of a land unable to overcome the curse placed on it by a higher power, regardless of how repentant its people are. Playing Blasphemous 2, I sometimes felt the same, as I wondered how I could possibly overcome the challenge before me. But like the denizens of The City of the Blessed Name, I persevered. And though the curses being thrown around my house each time I died were of a different variety than those cast in Blasphemous 2's story, I loved nearly every minute of this challenging Metroidvania journey.

Stepping back into the boots of The Penitent One, the game picks up shortly after the events of the DLC from the first game, but knowledge of that story isn't necessary to enjoy Blasphemous 2. The lore of Blasphemous runs deep, and you can engage with it as much or as little as you want through item text dumps and cutscenes. However, the bulk of my enjoyment came from exploring the ever-expanding, nonlinear map.

Moving from region to region never ceased to surprise me in all the best ways. Discovering a new NPC who can provide much-needed upgrades to my kit or stumbling upon powerful spells to add to my arsenal were always welcomed, but nothing tops the feeling of figuring out where to go next. Slowly expanding the maze-like map through thoughtful exploration and new traversal abilities became a meditative practice, only interrupted by areas I couldn't reach with my current moves or by the hordes of grotesque monsters that populate most rooms.

New horrors await in each region, and learning their attack patterns is essential for success. These

foes pack a punch, and when they gang up on you or trap you in a corner, it will likely lead to death. Thankfully, Blasphemous 2 gives you smooth and responsive combat to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. Learning how to slash through enemy types that once troubled you never ceases to satisfy. You can unlock and rotate through three main weapons, each with its own skill tree and traversal abilities, ensuring you have a playstyle that suits you. When combined with various upgrades, spells, and equipable stat boosts, I was happy with the level of customization, even though there's no proper gear system.

The white-knuckled calculus of whether to counter, dodge, or mount my own offensive in

hopes of stunning was common throughout my journey. Though I sometimes dreaded what awaited me in a subsequent room, I always relished the opportunity to show my skills. At times, the difficulty curve feels steeper than it should – a few battle arena rooms tested my patience as much as my skills – and the later checkpoints are a little sparse given how challenging the final sequences are, but it made my eventual victory all the sweeter.

These gauntlets were never more challenging than in the many boss encounters. From a heavily armored knight with projectile slashes to a shape-shifting behemoth that casts various elemental spells, the stiff and diverse challenges you face in boss battles are the ultimate test of your mastery to that point. The knowledge that I was entering a boss arena rarely failed to create a knot in my stomach as I worried about the coming fury, but in retrospect, they stick out as my most memorable moments.

At several points in my lengthy journey through the Gothic delight that is Blasphemous 2, I worried the monstrous foe in front of me would spell an end to my journey. But without these frequent frustrations, the triumphs wouldn't be as great. Blasphemous 2 takes inspiration from those that came before it, but by intertwining a gorgeous art style, enticing exploration, and rewarding combat, it rises above the horde of Castlevania-inspired action titles.

BY BRIAN SHEA

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC STYLE 1-Player Action PUBLISHER Team17
DEVELOPER The Game Kitchen RELEASE August 24 RATING M





ARMORED CORE VI FIRES OF RUBICON

A well-oiled machine

As a member of the niche mech-action genre, Armored Core has been out of commission for some time. The last entry in the series was a full 10 years ago, and since then, developer From Software's other titles (Elden Ring, Bloodborne, etc.) have made the developer a household name. Now, the studio has returned with Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon (ACVI), applying many lessons from its other action games. ACVI doesn't revolutionize the mech game formula but refines it to create one of the genre's fastest, best-looking, and most approachable entries.

ACVI establishes yet another all-new universe for the series, but its narrative tropes are immediately obvious to anyone who's played Armored Core before (or dystopian sci-fi in general). The player begins as a mercenary pilot controlled by the mysterious Handler Walter. Walter brought the mercenary to the frontier planet of Rubicon to hunt for a miraculous energy resource known as Coral, which was destroyed in an apocalyptic event. Militarized mega-corporations are also after the Coral, though, so the mercenary will have to take jobs from each to gain intel and pit the factions against each other.

The main gameplay loop of deploying on missions, earning credits, and using them to customize

your mech is as satisfying as ever, but movement and combat are the true highlights. The often-unwieldy button layouts of earlier games have been replaced with smooth, snappy controls that enable much faster gameplay. This, in turn, makes combat much more dynamic and fun as you dash and drift between hulking structures and enemies to cause large-scale destruction. Different weapons and mech parts also grant significantly different abilities, creating many potential playstyles.

Some may have expected From Software to change the Armored Core formula to resemble its recent titles, but ACVI sticks closely to the genre's established conventions. That's both to the benefit

and detriment of the game; missions are mostly short skirmishes against cannon-fodder enemies that give you that sense of material superiority, but they're also not very interesting.

In contrast, the major bosses are where From Software's pedigree really shows. Each of the game's five chapters contains an almost Souls-like superweapon that tests the limits of your current build and motivates you to experiment with other parts. The sheer spectacle of these fights also emphasizes how well ACVI runs and how good it looks; by the standards of the often bland and blocky mech-action genre, this is a gorgeous game.

ACVI is also the most approachable entry in the series and, indeed, one of From Software's most forgiving games. The debt system of previous entries is gone, and failing out of missions is no longer possible. There's no backtracking to fight bosses repeatedly, as checkpoints are generous. The auto-lock feature also streamlines single-target battles but removes the need to aim manually. All the simplification can be a double-edged sword, especially for Armored Core veterans. This is one From Software game where most can probably agree that difficulty modes would have been welcome.

Armored Core VI is a solid return for one of From Software's long-dormant franchises. It still carries many of the mech genre's old contrivances, like its generic mission structure and predictable plot. However, it modernizes mech action meaningfully to introduce it to a new generation. While legacy fans may have some complaints about the "casualization" of Armored Core, I am ultimately glad the series is back and firing on all cylinders. **BY CONNOR TRINSKE**

8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC STYLE 1-Player Action (6-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco Entertainment DEVELOPER From Software
RELEASE August 25 RATING T



BALDUR'S GATE 3

A true soul stirrer

Baldur's Gate 3 is a surprisingly human tale. That may sound strange to say about a game with space lizards and brain worms at its center, but behind the hags and psychic tadpoles, Baldur's Gate 3 is about a group of very broken people trying to find their way in life and maybe save the world. Or turn it into a smoldering heap of agony and misery. It depends on how you feel that day. Whether you choose peace or something less savory, Baldur's Gate 3's intricate writing and impressive emphasis on experimentation make it one of the most unforgettable games in the genre.

Baldur's Gate 3 transfers the complexity of Dungeons & Dragons to top-down RPG form, without losing any of the depth. It streamlines dice throws and ability checks so only the important decisions require your attention, leaving you free to focus on exploring the world and choosing your next move in turn-based battles. While you don't have a dungeon master to keep things unpredictable, you do have a staggering number of choices whose consequences reverberate through the game and an impressive level of depth and freedom on the battlefield.

Your story begins with a mix of deceptive simplicity and a brilliant framework for adventure. After having Mind Flayer tadpoles implanted in your brain, you and your companions – assuming you find said companions and don't kill them – seek a cure before tentacles and other Ilithid accouterments start replacing your flesh and bones.

The quest for a cure dips into the tired fantasy trope of an Evil Entity who wants to destroy the world, but it defies expectations when you think you have a grasp on the situation. Even when some plot beats are predictable, it never feels stale thanks to how cleverly it intertwines with the much more beautiful and devastating stories of your companions and others you meet. The character writing is consistently superb and makes for one of the most immersive settings in the genre.

After a few hours, you find yourself in a tangled mess of other people's problems and prejudices, wondering what fresh hell waits around the next corner. Baldur's Gate 3 excels at the unexpected, at putting you in surprising situations and making you think – or bash or psychic blast – your way out of them.

You walk down the road, and you may run into demons masking as holy soldiers or get tangled up in the pain-loving sisterhood of a cult if the exploding hyenas



don't get you first. It's the kind of unromanticized nightmare experience you'd expect if someone dropped you in a fantasy land full of strife and said, "good luck, have fun." Despite the fantasy trappings, it feels more grounded and realistic even at its most deranged – and it gets pretty deranged.

Baldur's Gate 3 has a strong sense of the ludicrous and is eager to not take itself seriously at times. For example, at the end of an early quest that involves a hag and a distraught widow, you can let the widow lead her zombie husband away to find a cure for him one day or turn him into your lifelong servant. It's a laughably grotesque situation, and that blend of dark humor with the capacity for doing good, evil, or something in between is why most of Baldur's Gate 3's quests stick with you for a long time.

That and the fact that you meet the results of your actions at some point, usually in Baldur's Gate 3's eponymous city. A thread of continuity in the game's events gives greater meaning to your actions and adds a layer of richness to the world and everyone in it.

Well, almost everyone. Devils may get the chance to prove they aren't so bad, but goblins, Drow, and a few other villain types remain two-dimensional in their lust for evil. Every fantasy has its irredeemable bad guy or group. However, the lack of deeper reflection stands out in a game where complexity defines every person and problem, and it perpetuates some of the more controversial facets of Dungeons and Dragons' racial determinism.

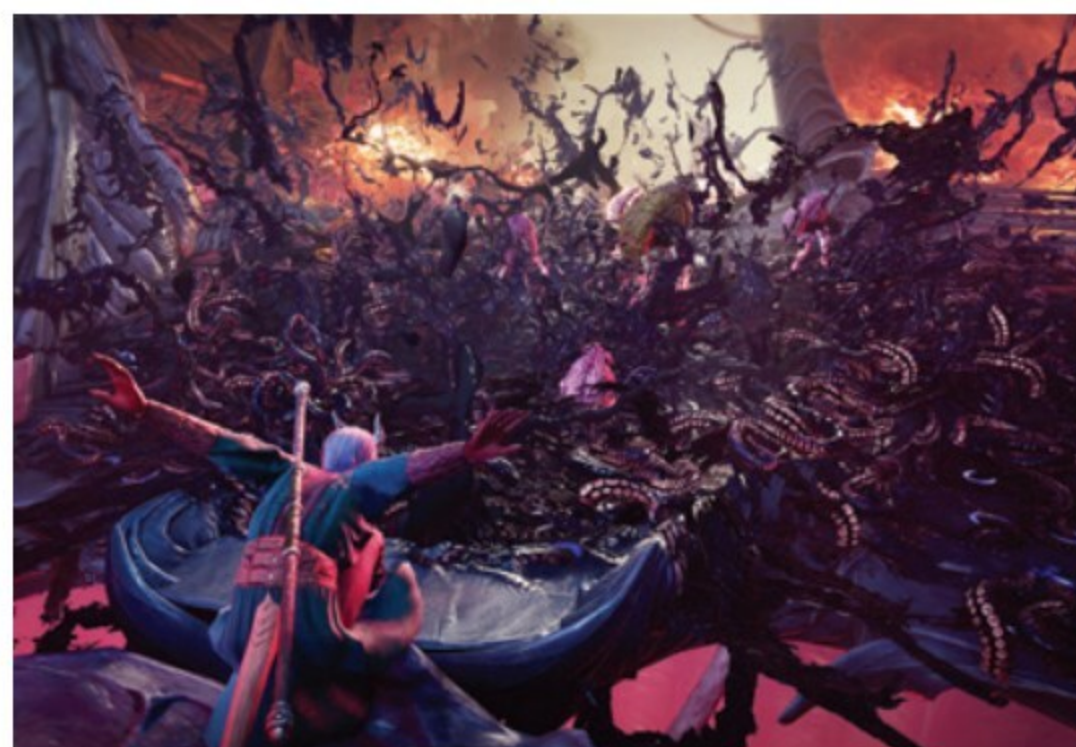
Whether they're maligned or malignant, dealing with your foes in Baldur's Gate 3 is never dull. Battle is a mix of ingenious design and frustrating density.



It takes the core of the tabletop experience and automates most of it, so your attack and saving throws happen unseen for a seamless experience – if you're an encyclopedia of D&D knowledge. The first act throws out dozens of systems without an explainer, so if you're unfamiliar with the iconic tabletop game, it might be an uphill struggle.

On the bright side, Baldur's Gate 3 gives you an overwhelming number of skills and approaches to handle every situation. Maybe you want to soften a mighty foe with a little acid spray, build a high-ground advantage with a bench and some garbage, or shove a boss in a hole during their big speech. There's so much freedom that you can improvise a solution in any situation and feel clever for it, even if it takes a while and reloading save files to get there.

Baldur's Gate 3 is unforgettable and one of the best experiences I've had in games. I may have just finished my lengthy first playthrough, but I'm already eager to delve further and push the boundaries of what's possible in this exceptional world that Larian created. **BY JOSH BROADWELL**



9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
 STYLE 1 to 4-Player Role-Playing PUBLISHER Larian Studios
 DEVELOPER Larian Studios RELEASE August 3 (PC), September 6 (PS5) RATING M



DISNEY ILLUSION ISLAND

Joy in simplicity

Disney Illusion Island puts Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy front and center in a Metroidvania adventure, and it is mostly successful. Where most platformers dole out fun using the adrenaline-inducing triumph of challenge, Illusion Island is instead built around the joy of movement, thanks partly to its combat-free exploration and the delight of controlling some of the most recognizable mascots in the world. It's a bit floaty and simple, especially for seasoned players, and I wanted my platforming prowess pushed more, but at its baseline, Illusion Island is always fun.

The Fab Four are tricked into traveling to Monoth, an original locale created by developer Dlala Studios, to save its inhabitants. To do so, they must track down three Tomes scattered around Monoth's various biomes. After a few cutscenes that might as well be original Mickey Mouse shorts with how delightful they are, I'm bouncing Mickey over danger en route to my first destination. It's a quick setup, but I also didn't feel like I needed more – Illusion Island gets right to the platforming action.

Mickey, Minnie, Donald, and Goofy play the same, but differences in animation make each feel unique. They're brought to life by the current voice actors, too. The entire package makes clear Dlala put a lot of love into making Illusion Island feel like a Disney creation, and it wholeheartedly works.

Before long, what starts as simple jogging and jumping becomes double, long, and wall jumping, widening the toolset at my disposal as I explore. And there's plenty to discover thanks to hundreds of collectibles.

Given Illusion Island features zero combat, that healthy dose of collectibles is necessary. However, a handful of bosses spread throughout its roughly seven-hour runtime provides more of that traditional combat-like feel. While you don't directly attack these bosses, your platforming moves can lead to damage against them. Every boss fight is uniquely diegetic, too, further highlighting Dlala's attention to detail.

Illusion Island is targeted toward children, with up to four-player co-op and options to make

characters invincible and restore health on the go with a simple interaction. I wish the game also catered to more experienced audiences, though, too. For the most part, I rarely felt challenged, and while I could lower my health before each session, I wanted more organic in-game tests of my abilities.

No matter what I do in Illusion Island, I'm entranced by composer David Housden's score. It's delightful and reminiscent of the joyous music that plays throughout Disney World's various themed lands, which makes Monoth's different biomes feel unique.

With credits behind me, I'm excited to discover more of Monoth's secrets and collectibles and I'm especially thrilled to play more with my 7-year-old nephew. Illusion Island doesn't overhaul the platformer genre, or the Metroidvania formula for that matter, but its distinctive no-combat focus on simply moving keeps the trip amusing, brisk, and gratifying. I would have liked more challenges; this is a simple adventure that might not capture the interest of platformer enthusiasts with little to no preoccupation with Disney. But when met on its own terms, it's hard to deny Illusion Island is a jubilant love letter to these characters and platforming. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

8.5

PLATFORM Switch STYLE 1 to 4-Player Platforming PUBLISHER Walt Disney Games
DEVELOPER Dlala Studios RELEASE July 28 RATING E



MADDEN NFL 24

Unnecessary roughness



Madden NFL 24 from EA Tiburon expands on the rebuilt fundamentals from last year, creating a football simulation that takes a solid next step toward authenticity. However, new poorly implemented features and an interface showing its age are enough of a drag to make this latest iteration feel like a step back for a series badly in need of forward progress.

The on-the-field gameplay is more realistic than ever. The physics-based player interactions are noticeably improved, with ball carriers pushing against piles for extra yards, aggressive fights for footballs in the air, and an excellent variety of tackles. I was particularly impressed with the times defenders would scoop up runners and drive them aggressively onto the turf.

Rebuilt player models have much more variety, better replicating the various shapes and sizes of real players. CPU-controlled defensive backs do more swatting of footballs and are far less inclined to make blind interceptions, alleviating a common gripe from last year's entry, though runners still bounce off of defenders too much, and noticeably improved blocking logic (especially on tosses and rollouts) has the offensive balance tilted a bit too far towards run-first teams.

Franchise mode has seen some of the biggest changes, particularly in player management. The ability to include more than three players per team in a trade is excellent, as is adding draft picks more than a year in the future. Restructuring certain contracts to free up cap space adds an authentic and useful roster construction tool.

Less successful is the implementation of the new minigames. Every offseason and weekly training involves a series of drills to play and earn bonus XP or upgrade points for players. Some of the games are fun, most are mediocre, and a few, like the DB battles, are painful. You can skip them, but you'll leave a lot of potential XP on the field. There's also a glaring

absence of a drill for offensive linemen. Even if you want to focus on developing your rookie offensive tackle, for instance, there is no added bonus to be had.

The general mix of play modes is slightly reshuffled. Superstar mode replaces Face of the Franchise, removing the threadbare storyline to focus on pure gameplay. The Yard is now called Superstar KO, and, as a neon-infused take on three-on-three football, is a fun diversion but grows tired quickly.

Madden Ultimate Team remains largely unchanged, but it also highlights one of Madden's biggest issues. Ending a game in MUT and opening a pack to unlock a player involves pages of aggravating load times. Madden looks slick and modern but has the responsiveness of an ancient laptop with too many tabs open, which is a problem given how much of the game takes place in menus, regardless of mode.

Madden 24 adds crossplay and cross-progression for the first time, and it's well implemented. There's a simple toggle to enable it for players on PlayStation, Xbox, and PC. Crossplay isn't available in Franchise mode, but playing head-to-head online was seamless, and the increased player pool should make for faster match-making. I was able to quickly find a friend on Xbox via my PS5 with a simple search of their EA username and easily play some games.

The improvements to the fundamental gameplay in Madden 24 continue to pay dividends with some of the most authentic football the series has ever seen. But, like an ill-timed penalty, the dreadfully slow menus and funneling toward tedious minigames wipe out any forward progress and move the series backward overall.

BY JUSTIN KOREIS

6.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Sports (6-Player Online) PUBLISHER EA Sports
DEVELOPER EA Tiburon RELEASE August 18 RATING E



IMMORTALS OF AVEUM

Modern fantasy warfare

Immortals of Aveum carves out its own place in the broad genre of shooters by setting its first-person action in the fantasy realm of Aveum, and it's refreshing to shoot at ax-wielding knights, magic-wielding sorcerers, and more. It helps that it mixes up its competent shooting with unique, puzzle-like twists to keep most encounters fresh and exploration exciting. And while the story's predictable, I rolled credits impressed with developer Ascendant Studios' first crack at this world and its mechanics.

Previously magic-less protagonist Jak becomes a powerful magic user known as an Immortal. This places him near the highest ranks of Lucium's Lights Army, fighting in the Everwar. Jak is powerful and capable of wielding three types of magic: Force (blue), Life (green), and Chaos (red). Blue magic serves as Immortals of Aveum's rifle, green is the machine gun of this world, and red is the shotgun. Each type of magic is more effective against specific types of enemies, adding a welcome element of strategy to every combat encounter. Jak fires magic through sigils he wears on his arms, and there are various sigils to find around Aveum, each with different stats, upgrade paths, and more. There are a few other gear pieces to find, and while upgrading each is straightforward, I'd be lying if I said I was invested in these stats.

Stronger enemies have specific shields attached to them coordinated with a type of magic in your sigils. For example, if an enemy has a blue shield up, you must use your blue magic to take it out. I love how Ascendant uses this to morph enemy-filled encounters into puzzle arenas. I could feel my combat competence growing with each encounter, and I used more of each arena's platforms, grapple hook rigs,

and other platforming elements to glide around areas taking out swaths of enemies.

Outside of combat, Ascendant goes to great lengths to fill its world with things to do. With light Metroidvania elements, there are plenty of places for me to revisit to find new gear, complete unique challenge rooms, solve puzzles, and defeat remaining bosses.

Side activities always felt like good uses of my time, but I can't say the same for main missions. For example, I'd go to the War Room for a cutscene. Then, after 20 seconds of walking to my quarters, another cutscene. And then back to the War Room, 20 seconds of walking away, for another cutscene. I wish

all of this would have been one big cutscene because walking between each brought me no joy or player agency.

I'm surprised how much I enjoyed Immortals of Aveum's story, especially given how often it threw proper nouns in my face alongside typical hero-speak and fantasy jargon. You won't find anything new regarding character growth and personality, and I saw where the narrative was heading from a mile away, but Immortals of Aveum's story is saved from tropes and mundaneness with a refreshing straightforwardness in its message and politics. Sometimes an evil kingdom is a kingdom full of fascists, and it is nice to hear these characters call that out, even if, overall, its themes are muddled by pacing and clichés.

The game's score is good fun, too, mixing a classic fantasy orchestra with 808s and other hip-hop beats to great effect. It's the bow atop the game's modern fantasy shooter wrapping.

Delivering something different and unique in a genre clogged with games set in real-world wars and battles is a commendable effort and pays off here for Ascendant. Immortals of Aveum is a great first outing, mixing the fantasy genre's vibes, storytelling, and world exploration with the gunplay of a modern FPS, and it's proof shooters still have a lot of room to grow outside of the usual releases. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER EA Originals DEVELOPER Ascendant Studios RELEASE August 22 RATING M



STRAY GODS: THE ROLEPLAYING MUSICAL



While some glitches detracted from my experience, they far from ruined it. Overall, Stray Gods rocks. Between the cast's fantastic performances, a fun twist on Greek mythology, and a genuinely novel mechanic, it's a game I didn't know I needed but one I'm happy to give a standing ovation. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Humble Games
DEVELOPER Summerfall Studios **RELEASE** August 10 **RATING** T



DOUBLE DRAGON GAIDEN: RISE OF THE DRAGONS

Double Dragon Gaiden has some aggravating design choices that prevent it from reaching the heights of similar comebacks like TMNT or newcomers like Young Souls, but this is a respectable return for the Lee brothers. If you're hankering to punch goons in the face, a good time can be had if you bring a measure of patience. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

7.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Modus Games **DEVELOPER** Secret Base
RELEASE July 27 **RATING** E10+

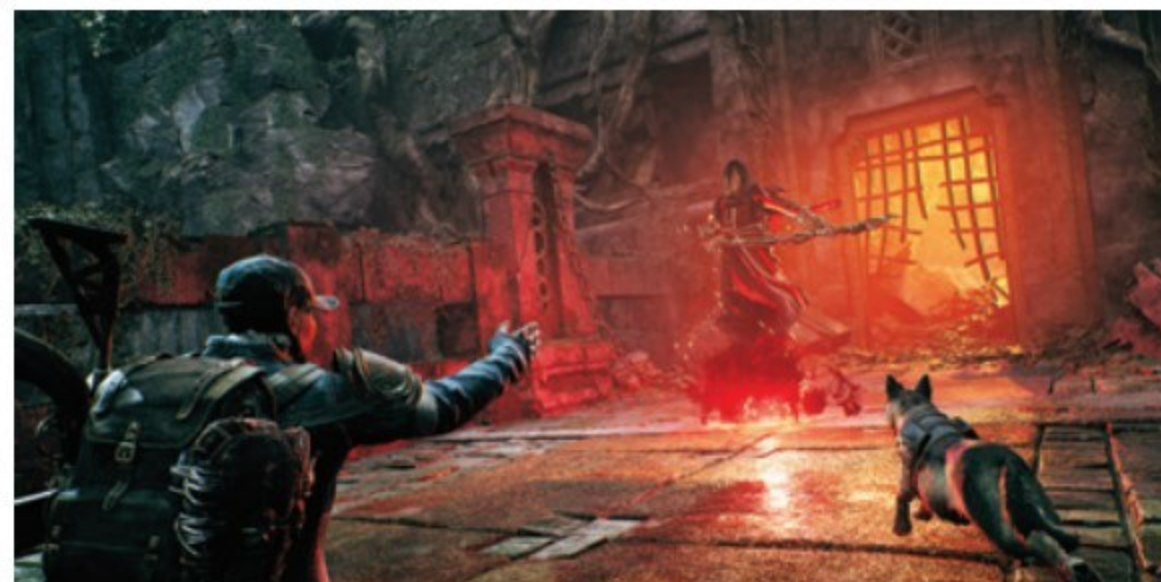


EXOPRIMAL

Exoprimal's creative subversion of expectations impressed me in more ways than one, and its approach to telling a robust narrative within a multiplayer framework is an example I hope other titles study. I just hope it's enough to keep the game from going extinct. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 10-Player Online Action
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
RELEASE July 14 **RATING** M



REMNANT II

Remnant II is most successful as a tour through a series of disparate dimensions, each contending with their own battles against the villainous Root plaguing their world. The gunplay is solid, the co-op with up to two other players works great, and the lore is fascinating (if you want to dig deep). Remnant II's plot, characters, and progression are where it falls short, but I like its third-person shooter take on mechanics and ideas borrowed from the Souls games. **BY KYLE HILLIARD ■**

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 3-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Gearbox Publishing **DEVELOPER** Gunfire Games
RELEASE July 25 **RATING** M

A close-up, low-angle shot of Sam Fisher from the video game Splinter Cell. He is wearing his signature black tactical gear, including a head-mounted display (HMD) with a green night vision filter. He is looking slightly to the left with a serious expression. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a piece of equipment.

RETROSPECTIVE

STEALTH THE HISTORY OF ACTION SPLINTER CELL REDEFINED

How an unlikely crew of inexperienced game developers
created one of gaming's stealth icons **BY NOLAN GOOD**

Splinter Cell's star has faded.

In the years since Sam Fisher's last outing, 2013's *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*, he's made a handful of cameo appearances and even shown his battle-worn visage at a conference or two. And there is a remake on the way – of which we've only seen concept art. But by most measures, the franchise has been dormant for a decade.

Nonetheless, Fisher was once the lead of a game momentous enough to compete for sales with *Halo*, have Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* team taking notes, and find itself referenced as the graphical and technical benchmark of the early Xbox years. With two decades of distance, it's hard to see the de-facto mascot of novelist Tom Clancy's video game offshoot brand as anything other than the embodiment of its ethos; the avatar of Clancy's own stable of globe-trotting, no-nonsense, flag-waving heroes. But in fact, his wry, ironic wit and detached sarcasm point to more than just the tropes informing his character – they betray the fact that his creators couldn't be further from Clancy's type.

"One time I was having lunch with the guys from PAX," says Ed Byrne, lead level designer, "and they were big fans of *Splinter Cell*. And when I told them this story, they were like, 'Wait a minute, wait a minute, *Splinter Cell* was ironic? It was an ironic Clancy game?'"

Byrne recounted his memory of J.T. Petty, who wrote the script: "He was a sandal-wearing, vegan, NYU student." Not at all the kind of guy who would keep a shelf of Jack Reacher novels.

"It was almost to the point where we just threw in all of these tropes to see what we could get away with," Byrne said, "and every time we added more tropes, the more Clancy-like it became."

Had Clancy shown any interest in the project, he may have objected, but Ubisoft Montreal's work was in his periphery at best.

That a studio like Ubisoft Montreal circa 2002, still largely unproven outside of its work on licensed,



kid-friendly games, could make a standout title in a genre it had never worked with, using a license much of the staff didn't care for, with a team made up mostly of completely inexperienced developers is remarkable. That it helped cement a burgeoning genre and remained one of the top-selling Xbox titles for the console's life is even more so.

"Seen from the inside, every game is a miracle," writes creative lead Francois Coulon in an email interview. "Here, the planets [were] perfectly aligned."

The story of *Splinter Cell* contains many such alignments, not the least of which is the unlikely pairing of, as Byrne recalls laughingly, "a bunch of bleeding heart liberals" and Clancy. Like any sufficiently complex video game, the seeds of its creation sprouted first in several different places. They came together only incidentally, through decisions and events happening separately and without connection. In the mind of a French artist dreaming up a world of floating islands, in a Paris boardroom over a game of *Metal Gear Solid*, in the offices of a North Carolinian animation tool company taking its first steps into a new medium.

GETTING THE CREW TOGETHER

For Nathan Wolff, it started in 1998 when he was looking for any job to get him out of his small hometown in rural Maine and into the big city: New York, New York.

"I don't remember where. I mean, back then, it must have been in some print newspaper or something. I saw an ad for 'video game designer.' [...] I don't know what moment of youthful confidence I had," Wolff says. Despite no real foreknowledge about what the job might entail, he sent a cover letter. After an unconventional interview where Wolff had to invent and flesh out game scenarios on the fly, he was hired just like that. In a couple more years, he would find himself as the lead game designer on Splinter Cell.

"Looking back, it was totally insane," Wolff says. "I had no experience."

He wasn't alone, either.

"I was a new game designer, just fresh out of college," says Ed Byrne, lead level designer. "It was all of our first gigs [...] Even the senior people on the team, myself included, were first-timers."

Whether Ubisoft intended to fill the ranks of a new studio with cheap labor by hiring green or foster innovation by bringing in untrained talent is difficult to determine. But the effect was the same either way. The small team that began work at Ubisoft New York was composed of mostly blank canvases. At first, it worked on licensed, child-friendly fare like Tarzan: Untamed. It wasn't too dissimilar to the slightly older Ubisoft Montreal just to the north, creating titles like Tonic Trouble and Laura's Happy Adventures – safe bets in the heyday of the licensed game era. Soon, however, an ambitious and promising project would arrive in their small, Midtown Manhattan office all the way from Paris.



THE DRIFT

Earlier that year, Francois Coulon, eventual associate producer and creative director of Splinter Cell, was heading up a team in Paris to develop Ubisoft's first shooter. Upper management hadn't shown much interest in the genre before, but Coulon convinced Ubisoft co-founder Yves Guillemot to give it a chance after showing him some scenes from Metal Gear Solid. It did the trick; the idea was greenlit with a small crew.

In early 1999, Gerard Guillemot sent Coulon's team to New York. It brought the beginnings of its new game, The Drift.

"In a sea of kid-friendly games, The Drift was the more mature sci-fi project that caught my attention immediately," writes lead character artist Martin Caya in an email interview.

In it, Earth had burst apart, the remains of civilization built atop the floating vestiges suspended high in the sky. Populating giant airborne islands were retro-futuristic buildings, flying cars, clunky analog gadgets, and dynamically reactive crowds. The game's protagonist wielded a hefty gun with an attached TV monitor, a manually winding winch grapple, and an old-school switchboard used to control its main feature: a video feed to take advantage of various vision augmentations and remote projectile cameras.

Dynamic, emergent, stylish – The Drift was supposed to be it all.

"The idea was that we could probably just pick the best gameplay mechanics and combine them into a game, and that would be The Drift," Byrne says. "But, of course, the problem is that you can't really just combine a whole bunch of gameplay mechanics and



have it be cohesive. And I think, ultimately, that's what killed the project."

The Drift was too ambitious for the inexperienced team at Ubisoft New York. When Ubisoft's number crunchers looked at the cost of maintaining a small studio in downtown Manhattan, some of the nation's most expensive real estate, the studio itself seemed a little too ambitious. The crew was offered the chance to relocate to Montreal and join the now 300-strong studio to its north. When it did, The Drift came too. It didn't last long. Corporate told Coulon that a new IP was too risky. Now with full access to Ubisoft Montreal's greater pool of resources and the company's catalog of characters to choose from, Coulon was asked to retool The Drift into a pre-existing franchise. Ubisoft, of course, had no shooters to work with.

"At the time, all you could throw was Rayman's fist!" says Coulon.

Without a character or property to guide production, the core team continued work on a generic third-person shooter, hoping something would eventually come along which might align with the work already completed.

"The head of Montreal Studio, willing to see this go into production, was coming to me every month or so with weird IP suggestions such as Pamela Anderson's *V.I.P.*," writes Coulon. The team even toyed with the idea of using James Bond. According to a 2014 article by *IGN*, a demo was created and used as a "shot in the dark attempt to impress the license holder," but nothing came of it.

"And then, of course, when [Ubisoft] bought Red Storm and got the Tom Clancy license, everything changed," says Byrne.





THE METAL GEAR SOLID 2 KILLER

A few years earlier, Clancy had enlisted the help of Cary, North Carolina-based Virtus Corporation, an animation company with a small video game division, to adapt his novel *SSN* into a video game. One day after its release, the new collaborators formed Red Storm Entertainment and went on to release a handful of Clancy titles that more or less came and went before *Rainbow Six* rocketed the studio into the mainstream. In the summer of 2000, Ubisoft scooped up the company to acquire the Clancy license.

“I immediately called the legal head of Ubisoft in Paris,” writes Coulon. He knew what to do with the untitled, rudderless third-person shooter floating in limbo at Ubisoft Montreal. Already a fan of Clancy, Coulon saw the potential for not just a good game but one with mass market appeal. “I had my small core team read the books, see the movies, and study what the Clancy license meant.”

“They were just so awful,” says Byrne. “I can admit it now. I’m sure Ubisoft would love to hear this, but I mean, none of us loved Clancy. It wasn’t our dream license.”

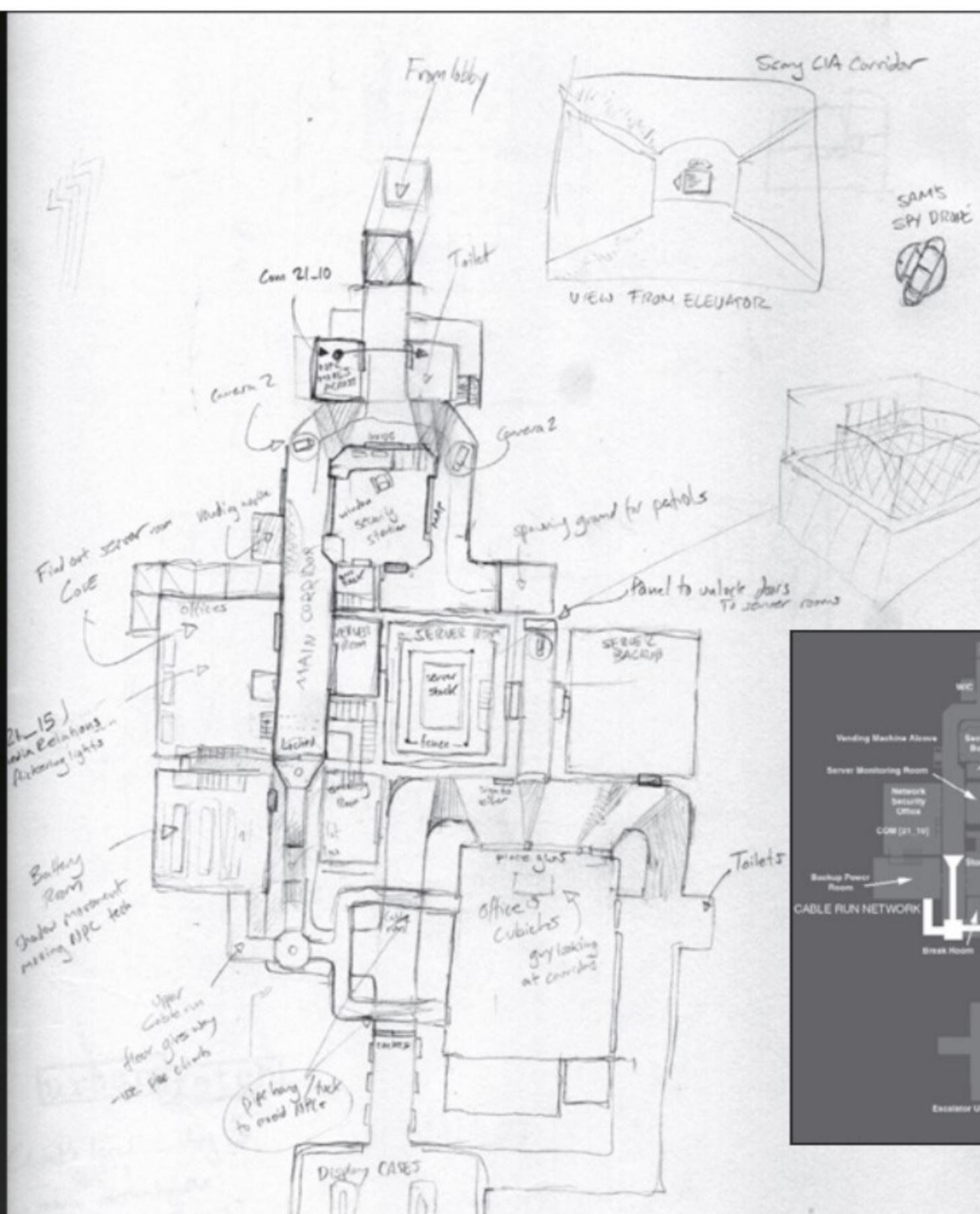
After scouring Clancy’s catalog for something adaptable and finding the options lacking, Ed Byrne, Nathan Wolff, and the other New York transplants

agreed they would need to make up something of their own.

“What we realized was, ‘Well, we can just put Clancy’s name on anything,’” says Byrne. In lots of cases, the licensee would take umbrage with giving an untested studio such freedom, but Tom Clancy himself showed little interest in the project. To Byrne’s recollection, his people only provided one guideline: never let the player kill anyone inside a church.

That didn’t mean the pressure was off, though. Konami unveiled *Metal Gear Solid 2* at E3 that spring with an almost too-good-to-be-true demo. The excitement was feverish. Ubisoft Montreal’s still untitled project had just enough shared characteristics – high-tech gadgets, espionage, contemporary political set-dressing – to be a competitor. Of course, the team, still small, inexperienced, and unproven, probably didn’t think of itself as competing with Hideo Kojima, even then a widely celebrated director. Ubisoft, however, handed word down: make the game a “*Metal Gear Solid 2* killer.”

Envisioning how the myriad selection of mechanics and ambitious ideas workshopped for *The Drift* would be turned into the next Tom Clancy game was made easier by this new constraint. If *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* covered SWAT-style tactical raids



and military spec-ops, respectively, then Splinter Cell would do intel-gathering black ops. The stealth pillar stood out from the existing Clancy projects, while the Clancy name and grounded realistic world made it unique to Metal Gear.

Before Splinter Cell became the title, the team kicked around many alternatives. Echelon was the studio's top choice for a while, but it couldn't use it for legal reasons.

The meaning of Splinter Cell is a bit unclear, depending on which game in the series one plays (and no one interviewed for this story remembers exactly how it came about), but it stuck.

DESIGNING LEVELS

While the team knew it was making a stealth game, what that would look like was up in the air. A split existed between those wanting to take inspiration from Looking Glass Studios' 1998 game *Thief: The Dark Project*, drawing upon its open-ended, naturalistic levels and subdued presentation, and those wanting to emulate Metal Gear Solid and its more directed, set-piece-driven approach to stealth action.

To some degree, both sides got their way. Splinter Cell didn't have a single director, like most games. Instead, the team divided direction into separate "packets" by

pairing level designers with environment artists and having each set of two make its own stage. When played with this in mind, it's not hard to verify – the game's nine levels, though consistent with the overall style, each represents distinct flavors of Splinter Cell.

Ubisoft Montreal kept a "war room" where big foam core panels adorned one wall. On them, the team divided the game into story beats. By arranging notes, it could attach levels, design concepts, characters, and mechanics to each chunk of the story. Though each level design pairing had relative freedom over their section of the game, the overall structure helped keep things on track.

The Unreal engine let the team extensively use something Ubisoft's internal OpenGL engine didn't: dynamic light and shadow.

Earlier in development, when asked by a higher-up what the core gameplay was, the team didn't necessarily have a clear answer beyond the basic premise of stealth. However, once the engineering team began taking advantage of Unreal's shadows, it became clear that it would need to be a consideration at every level. Given that a level could only have a couple of real-time, dynamic lights due to resource limitations, most of it had to be static. That limitation worked in favor of Splinter Cell's deliberate design, however.

↓
Design ideas from
Splinter Cell's
"CIA HQ" level.
Courtesy of Ed Byrne

In Byrne's design notebook, the initial draft of the "CIA HQ" level reminds one of level design circa the cartridge days: sharp lines on graph paper, with rooms and interior features scrawled in pen. The shadows, Splinter Cell's only refuge for Fisher, are drawn by hand. From the top down, one can see the routes and vulnerabilities in security. The shadows and vision gaps Sam can take advantage of becoming like an imaginary line drawn through a maze.

In-game, the artifice is harder to detect. The trick of most good game design is something like smoke and mirrors, a wild west village of false walls and facades propped up around the player to impart the impression of a place. The illusion is strong in Splinter Cell, especially for a 2002 title. The impressive graphical technology plays a part, of course, but so does the attention to detail and set dressing. Guards don't just walk back and forth; they try to get food out of uncooperative vending machines, step outside for smoke breaks, or lounge in chairs and watch TV.

In some environments, the team made entire effects just to add interactivity and verisimilitude to one room. People make much ado about Metal Gear Solid 2's real-time melting ice cubes, but lesser known is Splinter Cell's fish tank which, when shot, slowly drains water from each bullet hole until the water level stabilizes. What is, on paper, a relatively simple and classically designed video game becomes, in practice, a densely atmospheric and involving experience due to such touches.

Mechanics were worked on by many but chiefly organized by Wolff.

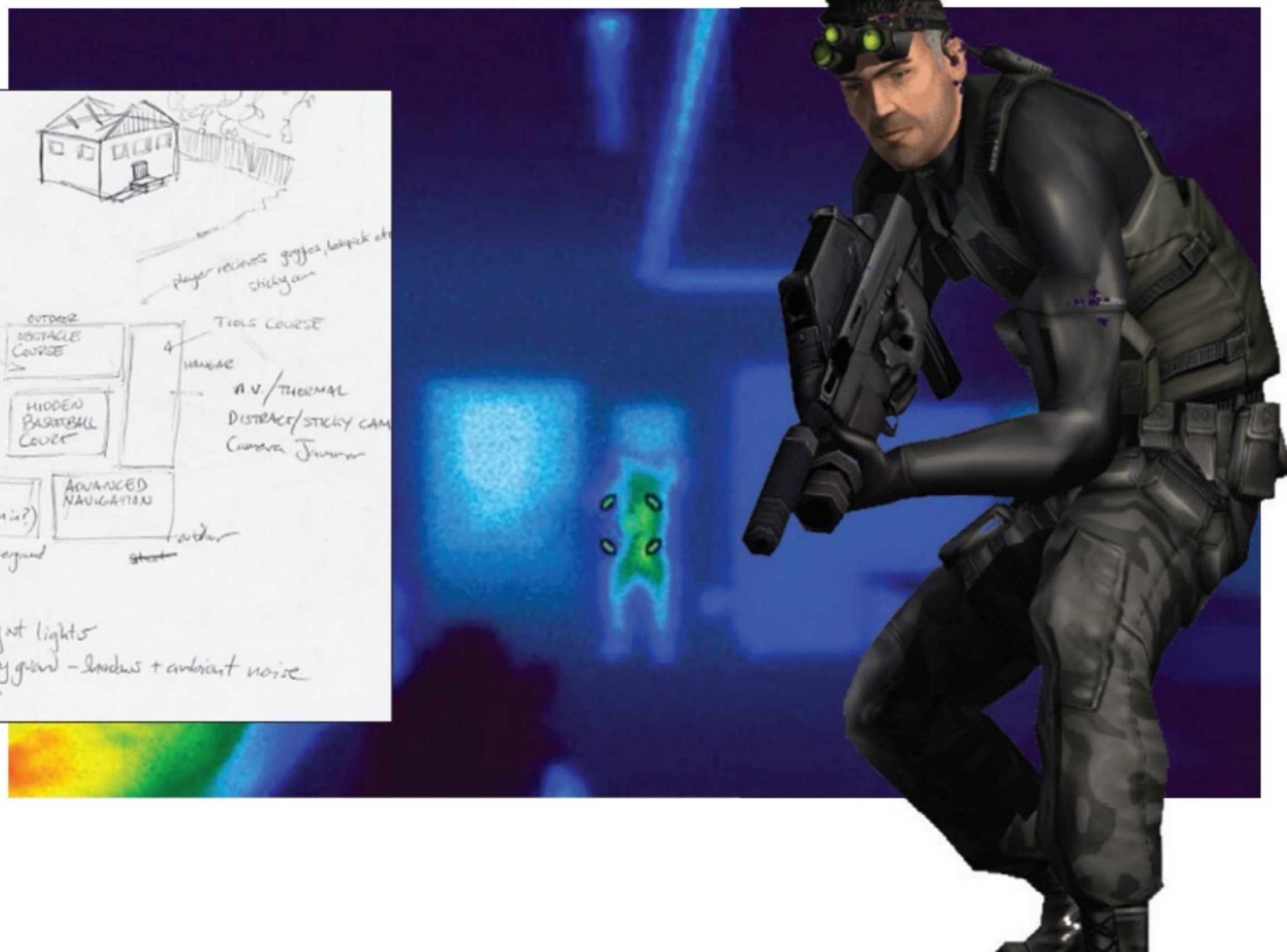
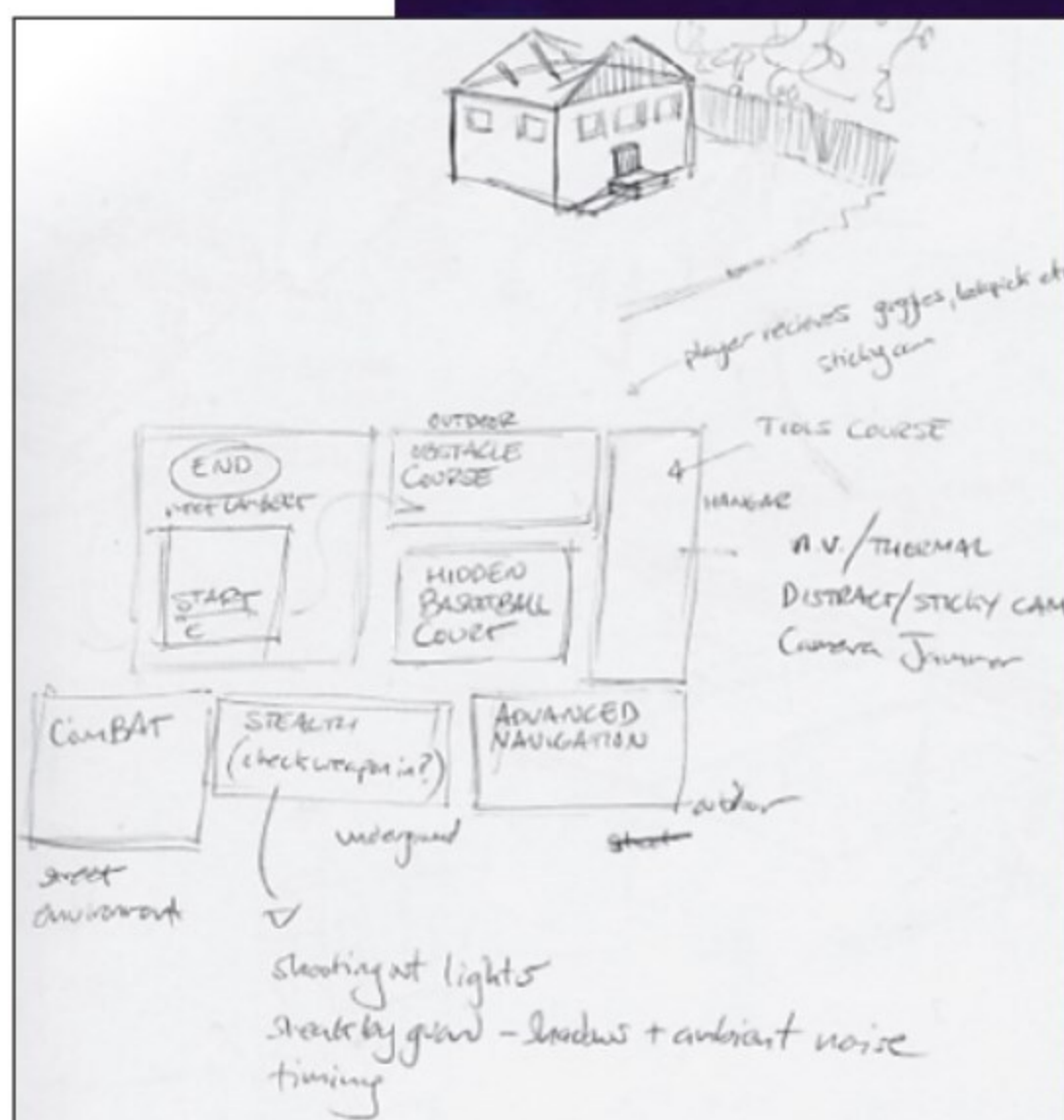
"My role was, basically, just generating a ton of documents," says Wolff. Every gadget, item, and method of interaction that the player has access to needed a document to describe its relevance to the game and use case. If Fisher could grab a guard and interrogate him, for example, Wolff would need to write a few pages on why the player would do that, how it would work with the level design, and what to do with it during development. Each of the individual elements could then be distilled and applied to the foam core "war room" boards for organization so that the team could create the game's difficulty curve and pace of mechanical addition. By accumulating these documents, Wolff created a design bible for the game.

Many of the gadgets, weapons, and interactions were designed in advance of the levels. Petty, who headed the writing team and wrote much of the script, helped distribute gameplay ideas throughout the story, which, again, resulted in further tweaking of the "war room" charts.

A LASTING LEGACY

Check any contemporaneous review of Splinter Cell, and you'll find lavish praise directed at the game's audio. In any stealth game, situational awareness is key. In Metal Gear Solid, at least its then-existing iterations, that mostly meant using a radar and watching patrol patterns. In Splinter Cell, however, the cogs and machinery underpinning everything are a little more hidden. Without clear, gamey cues to follow, players must take refuge in the shadows

↓
Inset: Design ideas from Splinter Cell's "Training" level, which serves as the tutorial
Courtesy of Ed Byrne



and watch as the scripting unfolds, noting where guards go, what actions they telegraph, and so on. Compared to most games of its time, you spend a lot of Splinter Cell stationary, watching. As such, the soundscape plays a key role in evoking a space.

Fabien Noel was the only member of the sound team during production. In 2001, Noel was working in France in a wholly separate field. He moved to Montreal to try applying his background to something new. He worked on *Batman: Vengeance* for the GBA before making his way to *Splinter Cell*. Noel, having specialized in the acoustics of buildings, noticed something lacking right away.

"The first thing I realized was, 'Wow, there was no sound propagation,'" Noel says. "At that time, there was no notion of walls and doors. That when you close a door, the sound is muffled; when you open the door, it is not." Working with the engineering team, Noel created a system that simulated the movement and dissipation of sound waves throughout the game environment, considering each room's architecture and layout. He used a similar system to control sound levels on different types of flooring. Because the system was expensive on the CPU, Noel had to fight with the team for his share.

"I was nice aggressive, but I did not take a no for a no," says Noel. "Sound is important; it is part of the immersion."

Noel also directed Michael Ironside, whose gruff performance as Fisher is as iconic as the character's design itself.

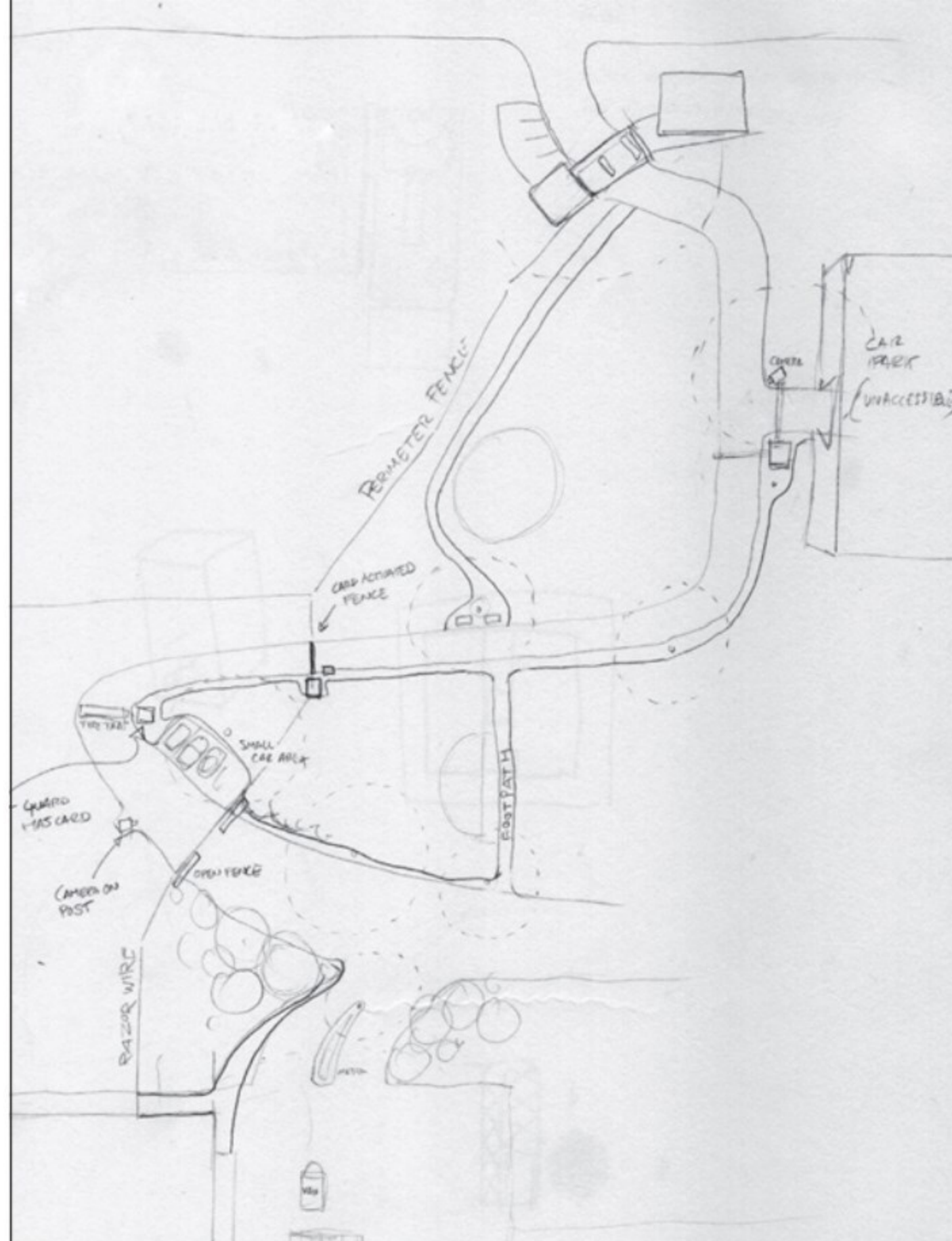
"At the beginning, it was kind of, 'It's just video games, so it's not very important,' but I think [Ironside] got attached to the character," Noel says. "After a couple games, he was asking us, 'When are we doing the next *Splinter Cell*?'"

Ironside's voice was instrumental in bringing the character to life but wouldn't have been quite so effective without Fisher's quintessential design.

"In all honesty, I was simply just trying to come up with a design that I'd thought would look cool," says Caya. He pored through military magazines, comics, and movies, looking for anything to spark an idea.

"One day, while sketching some rough ideas, I just had this cool visual suddenly pop up in my mind's eye," Caya continues. "I could see the outline of a dark silhouette hiding in the shadows, and the only thing visible would be the reflection of some lights bouncing off the lenses of some night vision goggles. I instantly knew that I had found the visual foundations for Sam. Never mind that it realistically didn't make a lick of sense in a stealth game. I just thought it was f---ing cool."

Others floated the idea of making Sam older and giving him some gray. Fabien Noel attached the night vision startup sound, now synonymous with the brand. Petty and company gave him the wry,



detached humor and lines that exude the confidence of a man comfortably past his prime but none the worse for wear. Ironside brought him to life.

Just like any video game of its scale, *Splinter Cell* was made in that fashion: each element created carefully and up close before being fitted into the larger patchwork. Unlike most, however, its lack of a single director or person to make the calls made *Splinter Cell* more quilt-like than most. Each level, character, mechanic, and room carries the subtle seal of its unsung creator yet coheres under the team's commitment to collaboration and compromise.

That an unproven studio made up of primarily inexperienced developers with no work history could turn the remnants of a canceled game into the makings of a bonafide console seller is nothing short of remarkable. Five sequels and over 20 years on, *Splinter Cell* remains an exemplary video game. Except for some cameos, it has been ten years since Fisher has seen the light of day.

One can only hope that when the old man returns in the upcoming remake of his first outing, the devs shepherding him in can replicate the passion and verve of his original creators.

"We were just these young dudes being like, 'Hey, would this be cool? Let me draw it on a napkin,'" recalls Wolff. "If the idea works, even if it's from someone without a lot of experience and done in a little bit of an amateur way, the idea was solid. The idea worked." ■

↓
Design ideas from *Splinter Cell*'s "CIA HQ" level which ultimately didn't make the cut, showing a proposed addition where players would escort a van out of the facility.
Courtesy of Ed Byrne



ONE LAST THING

THE SEASON AHEAD

Plan your fall and holiday gaming schedules with our handy checklist of the biggest titles being released in the next few months

SEPTEMBER

- ☐ Baldur's Gate 3 (PS5) – 9/6
- ☐ Starfield (Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/6
- ☐ Fae Farm (Switch) – 9/8
- ☐ NBA 2K24 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 9/8
- ☐ Super Bomberman R 2 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 9/12
- ☐ The Crew Motorfest (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 9/14
- ☐ Lies of P (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/19
- ☐ Mortal Kombat 1 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC) – 9/19
- ☐ Eternights (PS5, PS4, PC) – 9/21
- ☐ Payday 3 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/21
- ☐ Mineko's Night Market (Switch, PC) – 9/26
- ☐ Infinity Strash: Dragon Quest The Adventure of Dai (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Switch, PC) – 9/28
- ☐ Cocoon (Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 9/29
- ☐ EA Sports FC 24 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 9/29

← Lies of P

OCTOBER

- ☐ Disgaea 7: Vows of the Virtueless (PS5, PS4, Switch, PC) – 10/3
- ☐ Assassin's Creed Mirage (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, PC) – 10/5
- ☐ Detective Pikachu Returns (Switch) – 10/6
- ☐ Forza Motorsport (Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 10/10
- ☐ Wild Card Football (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 10/10
- ☐ Lords of the Fallen (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 10/13
- ☐ Endless Dungeon (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Switch, PC) – 10/19
- ☐ Hot Wheels Unleashed 2: Turbocharged (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 10/19
- ☐ Marvel's Spider-Man 2 (PS5) – 10/20
- ☐ Super Mario Bros. Wonder (Switch) – 10/20
- ☐ Metal Gear Solid: Master Collection Volume 1 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC) – 10/24
- ☐ Alone in the Dark (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 10/25
- ☐ Alan Wake 2 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 10/27
- ☐ Jusant (Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 10/31

NOVEMBER

- ☐ Star Ocean: The Second Story R (PS5, PS4, Switch, PC) – 11/2
- ☐ Thirsty Suitors (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 11/2
- ☐ WarioWare: Move It! (Switch) – 11/3
- ☐ Like A Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 11/9
- ☐ Persona 5 Tactica (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 11/17
- ☐ Super Mario RPG (Switch) – 11/17

DECEMBER

- ☐ Dragon Quest Monsters: The Dark Prince (Switch) – 12/1
- ☐ Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 12/7

For a comprehensive list of upcoming releases, including games with release dates yet to be finalized, visit [GameInformer.com/2023](https://www.gameinformer.com/2023) ■

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